THE SIEGE·OF·THE·SEVEN SUITORS

By MEREDITH NICHOLSON

Mrs. Hallmeyer.

Love to Mable

Miss Palmer.

The Siege of the Seven Suitors

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"HEZEKIAH"

The Siege of The Seven Suitors

BY

MEREDITH NICHOLSON

AUTHOR OF "THE HOUSE OF A THOUSAND CANDLES," ETC.

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TO

THE HONORABLE THOMAS R. MARSHALL

MY DEAR GOVERNOR: — It was ordered by the franchises of destiny that you become the chief executive of a state in which the telling of tales brightened the hunter's camp-fire and cheered the lonely pioneer's cabin before our people learned the uses of ink; and the supreme fitness of this lies in the fact that you are yourself the best of story-tellers and entitled, for your excellence in this particular, as well as for weightier reasons, to sit at the head of the table in that commonwealth to which we are both bound by many and dear ties.

The morning brings to your mail-box so many demands, necessitating the most varied and delicate balancings and adjustments, that I serve you ill in adding to your burdens the little packet that contains this tale. Pray consider, however, that I have hidden it discreetly beneath a pile of documents touching nearly the state's business; or that I hastily serve it upon you in the highway, an unsanctioned writ from that high court of letters in which I am the least valiant among the bailiffs.

Sincerely yours,
M. N.

MACKINAC ISLAND,
August 10, 1910.

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THE SIEGE OF THE SEVEN SUITORS

I

MY FRIEND WIGGINS IS INTRODUCED

I DINED with Hartley Wiggins at the Hare and Tortoise on an evening in October, not very long ago. It may be well to explain that the Hare and Tortoise is the smallest and most select of clubs, whose windows afford a pleasant view of Gramercy Park. The club is comparatively young, and it is our joke that we are so far all tortoises, creeping through our several professions without aid from any hare. I hasten to explain that I am a chimney doctor. Wiggins is a lawyer; at least I have seen his name in a list of graduates of the Harvard Law School, and he has an office down-town where I have occasionally found him sedately playing solitaire while he waited for some one to take him out to luncheon. He spends his summers on a South Dakota ranch, from which he derives a considerable income. When tough steaks are served from the club grill, we always attribute them to the cattle on Wiggins's hills. Or if the

lamb is ancient, we declare it to be of Wiggins's shepherding. It is the way of our humor to hold Wiggins responsible for things. His good nature is usually equal to the worst we can do to him. He is the kind of fellow that one instinctively indicts without hearing testimony. We all know perfectly well that Wiggins's ranch is a wheat ranch.

Wiggins is an athlete, and his summers in the West and persistent training during the winter in town keep him in fine condition. As I faced him to-night in our favorite corner of the Hare and Tortoise dining-room, the physical man was fit enough; but I saw at once that he was glum and dispirited. He had through many years honored me with his confidence, and I felt that to-night, after we got well started, I should hear what was on his mind. I hoped to cheer him with the story of a visit I had by chance paid that afternoon to the Asolando Tea-Room; for though Wiggins is a most practical person, I imagined that he would be diverted by my description of a place which, I felt sure, nothing could tempt him to visit. I shall never forget the look he gave me when I remarked, at about his third spoonful of soup:

"By the way, I dropped into an odd place this afternoon. Burne-Jones buns, Rossetti mac-

caroons, and all that sort of thing. They call it the Asolando" —

I was ambling on, expecting to sharpen his curiosity gradually as I recited the joys of the tea-room; but at "Asolando" his spoon dropped, and he stared at me blankly. It should be known that Wiggins is not a man whose composure is lightly shaken. The waiter who served us glanced at him in surprise, a fact which I mention merely to confirm my assertion that the dropping of a spoon into his soup was an extraordinary occurrence in Wiggins's life. Wiggins was a proper person. On the ranch, twenty miles from a railroad, he always dressed for dinner.

"The Asolando," I repeated, to break the spell of his blank stare. "Know the place?"

He recovered in a moment, but he surveyed me quizzically before replying.

"Of course I have heard of the Asolando, but I thought you did n't go in for that sort of thing. It's a trifle girlish, you know."

"That's hardly against it! I found the girlishness altogether attractive."

"You always were tolerably susceptible, but broiled butterflies and moth-wings soufflé seem to me rather pale food for a man in your vigorous health."

"They must have discriminated in your favor;

I saw no such things, though to be sure I was afraid to quibble over the waitress's suggestions. May I ask when you were there?"

"Oh, I dropped in quite accidentally one day last spring. I saw the sign, and remembered that somebody had spoken of the place, and I was tired, and it was a long way to the club, and" —

Dissimulation is not an art as Wiggins attempts to practice it at times. He is by nature the most straightforward of mortals. It was clear that he was withholding something, and I resolved to get to the bottom of it.

"I don't think the Asolando is a place that would attract either of us, and yet the viands are good as such stuff goes, and the gentle handmaidens are restful to the eye, — Pippa, Francesca, Gloria, and the rest of 'em."

Wiggins pried open his artichoke with the care of a botanist. He had regained his composure, but I saw that the subject interested him.

"You were there this afternoon?" he inquired.

"Yes, my first and only appearance."

"And this is Monday."

"The calendar has said it."

"So you settled your bill with Pippa! I believe this was her day."

"Then you really do know the inner workings of the Asolando," I continued; "I thought you would show your hand presently. Then it is perhaps Gloria, Beatrice or Francesca who minds the till on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, alternating with Pippa, who took my coin today. It's a pretty idea. It has the delicacy of an arrangement by Whistler or the charm of a line in Rossetti. So you have seen the blessed damozel at the cash-desk."

"On the contrary I was never there on Tuesday, Thursday, or Saturday, and I therefore passed no coin to Francesca, Gloria or Beatrice. My only visit was on a day last May, and my recollection of the system is doubtless imperfect."

"Then beyond doubt I saw Pippa. She makes the change on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Her eyelashes are a trifle too long for the world's peace."

"I dare say. I have n't your charming knack, Ames, of picking up acquaintances, so you must n't expect me to form life-long friendships with young women at cash-desks. I suppose it did n't occur to you that those young women who tend till and serve the tables in there are persons of education and taste. The Asolando is not a common hashery. I sometimes fear that so much crawling through chimneys is clouding

your intellect. It ought to have been clear even to your smoky chimney-pot that those girls in there are not the kind you can ask to meet you by the old mill at the fall of dewy eve, or who write notes to popular romantic actors. There's not a girl in that place who has n't a social position as good as yours or mine. The Asolando's a kind of fad, you know, Ames; it's not a tavern within the meaning of the inn-keepers' act, where common swine are fed for profit. The servants serve for love of the cause; it's a sort of cult. But I suppose you are incapable of grasping it. There was always something sordid in you, and I'm pained to find that you're getting worse."

Wiggins had, before now, occasionally taken this attitude toward me, and it was always with a view to obscuring some real issue between us. He requires patience; it is a mistake to attempt to crowd him; but give him rope and he will twist his own halter.

We sparred further without result. I had suggested a topic that had clearly some painful association for my friend. He drank his coffee gloomily and lighted a cigar much blacker than the one I knew to be his favorite in the Hare and Tortoise humidor. He excused himself shortly, and I had a glimpse of him later, in the writing-room, engaged upon letters, a fact in itself dis-

quieting, for Wiggins never wrote letters, and it was he who had favored making the Hare and Tortoise writing-room into a den for pipe-smokers. The epistolary habit, he maintained, was one that should be discouraged.

I was moodily turning over the evening newspapers when Jewett turned up. Jewett always knows everything. I shall not call him a gossip, but he comes as near deserving the name as a man dares who lectures on the Renaissance before clubs and boarding-schools. Jewett knows his Botticelli, but his knowledge of his contemporaries is equally exact. He dropped the ball into the green of my immediate interest with a neat approach-shot.

"Too bad about old Wiggy," he remarked with his preluding sigh.

"What's the matter with Wiggins?" I demanded.

"Ah! He has n't told you? Thought he told you everything."

This was meant for a stinger, and I felt the bite of it.

"You do me too much honor. Wiggins is not a man to throw around his confidences."

"And I rather fancy that his love-affairs in particular are locked in his bosom."

Jewett was a master of the art of suggestion;

he took an unnecessarily long time to light a cigar so that his words might sink deep into my consciousness.

"Saw her once last spring. Got a sight draft from the Bank of Eros. Followed her across the multitudinous sea. Bang!"

"But Wiggy has n't been abroad. Wiggy was on his Dakota ranch all summer. He 's all tanned from the sun, just as he is every fall," I persisted.

"Wrote you from out there, did he? Sent you picture-postals showing him herding his cattle, or whatever the beasts are? Kept in touch with you all the time, did he? I tell you his fine color is due to Switzerland, not Dakota."

"Wiggins is n't a letter-writer, nor the sort of person who wants to paper your house with picture-postals. His not writing does n't mean that he was n't on his ranch," I replied, annoyed by Jewett's manner.

"Never dropped you before, though, I wager," he chirruped. "I tell you he saw Miss Cecilia Hollister at the Asolando tea-shop: just a glimpse; but almost immediately he went abroad in pursuit of her. The chevalier — that 's her aunt Octavia — was along and another niece. My sister saw the bunch of them in Geneva, where the chevalier was breaking records. A whole

troop of suitors followed them everywhere. My sister knows the girl — Cecilia — and she's known Wiggy all her life. She's just home and told me about it last night. She thinks the chevalier has some absurd scheme for marrying off the girl. It's all very queer, our Wiggy being mixed up in it."

"Don't be absurd, Jewett. There's nothing unusual in a man being in love; that's one fashion that does n't change much. I venture to say that Wiggins will prove a formidable suitor. Wiggins is a gentleman, and the girl would be lucky to get him."

"Quite right, my dear Ames; but alas! there are others. The competition is encouraged by the aunt, the veteran chevalier. My sister says the chevalier seems to favor the suit of a Nebraska philosopher who rejoices in the melodious name of Dick."

Jewett was playing me for all his story was worth, and enjoying himself immensely.

"For Heaven's sake, go on!"

"Nice girl, this Cecilia. You know the Hollisters, — oodles of money in the family. The chevalier's father scored big in baby-buggies — responsible for the modern sleep-inducing perambulators; sold out to a trust. The father of Wiggins's inamorata had started in to be a

marine painter. A founder of this club, come to think of it, but dropped out long ago. You have heard of him — Bassford Hollister. Funny thing his having to give up art. Great gifts for the marine, but never could overcome tendency to seasickness. Honest! Every time he painted a wave it upset him horribly. The doctors could n't help him. Next tried his hand at the big gulches down-town. There was a chance there to hit off the metropolitan sky-line and become immortal by doing it first; but a new trouble developed. Doing the high buildings made him dizzy! Honest! He was good, too, and would have made a place, but he had to cut it out. He was so torn up over his two failures that he blew in his share of the perambulator money in riotous living. Lost his wife into the bargain, and has settled down to a peaceful life up in Westchester County in one of these cute little bungalows the real-estate operators build for you if you pay a dollar down for a picture of an acre lot."

"And the daughter?"

"Well, Bassford Hollister has two daughters. It's the older one that has stolen Wiggins's heart away. She's Cecilia, you know. Very literary and that sort of thing, and pushed tea and cookies at the Asolando when that idiocy

was opened. Wiggins saw her there last spring. Miss Hollister, the aunt, — whom I'm fond of calling the chevalier, — picked up her nieces about that time and hauled them off to Europe, and Wiggins scampered after them. I don't know what they did to Wiggy, but you see how he acts. I rather imagine that the chevalier did n't smile on his suit. She's a holy terror, that woman, with an international reputation for doing weird and most unaccountable things. She draws a sort of royalty on all the baby-buggies in creation; it amounts to a birth-tax, in contravention of the free guarantees of the Constitution. The people will rise against it some day.

"She's plausible enough, but she's the past mistress of ulterior motive. She got Fortner, the mural painter, up to a place she used to have at Newport a few years ago, ostensibly to do a frieze or something, and she made him teach her to fire a gun. You know Fortner, with his artistic ideals! And he did n't know any more about guns than a flea. It was droll, decidedly droll. But she kept him there a month, — would n't let him off the reservation; but she paid him his fee just the same, though he never painted a stroke. When he got back to town, he was a wreck. It was just like being in jail. I warn you to let her alone. If you should under-

take to fix her flues she's likely to put you to work digging potatoes. She's no end of a case."

"Well, Wiggins is a good fellow, one of the very best," I remarked, as I absorbed these revelations, "and it is n't the girl's aunt he wants to marry."

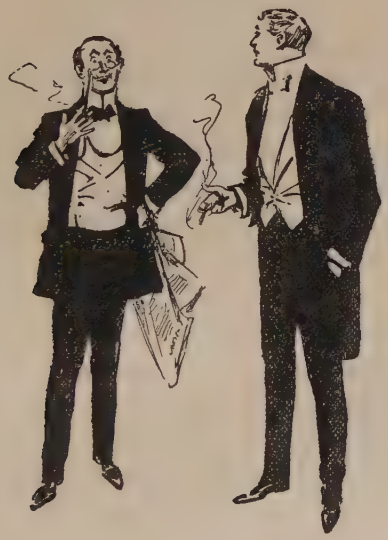
"He's a capital fellow," affirmed Jewett, "and that's why it's a sin this had to happen to him. There's no telling where this affair may lead him. There's something queer in the wind, all right. The chevalier has brother Bassford where he can't whimper; I rather fancy he feeds from her hand. His girls have n't any prospects except through the chevalier. Nice girls, so I'm told; but between the father with his vertiginous tendencies and a lunatic aunt who holds the family money-bags, I don't see much ahead of them. Miss Cecilia Hollister is living with her aunt; it's a sort of compulsory sequestration; she has to do it whether she wants to or not. I rather fancy it's to keep her away from Wiggins."

"And the other sister; where does she come in?"

"Not important, I fancy. Rumor is silent touching her. In fact I've never heard anything of her. But this Cecilia is no end handsome and proud. Poor old Wiggy!"

I was already ashamed of myself for having

encouraged Jewett to discuss Wiggins's affairs, and was about to leave him, when he snorted, in



a disagreeable way he had, at some joke that had occurred to him, and he continued chuckling to himself to attract my attention. My frown did not dismay him.

"I knew there was something," he was saying, "about Miss Cecilia's younger sister, and I've just recalled it. The girl has a most extraordinary name, quite the most remarkable you ever heard."

He laughed until he was purple in the face. I did not imagine that any name known to feminine nomenclature could be so humorous.

"Hezekiah! Bang! That's the little sister's name. Bassford Hollister had been saving that name for a son, who never appeared, to do honor to old Hezekiah, the perambulator-chap. So they named the girl for her grand-dad. Bang! One of the apostles, Hezekiah!"

I waited for his mirth to wear itself out, and then rose, to terminate the interview with an adequate dramatic dismissal.

"You poor pagan," I remarked, with such irony as I could command; "it's too bad you insist on revealing the abysmal depths of your ignorance: Hezekiah was not an apostle, but a mighty king before the day of apostles."

I left him blinking, and unconvinced as to Hezekiah's proper place in history.

Wiggins, I learned at the office, had, within half an hour, left the club hurriedly in a cab, taking a trunk with him. He had mentioned no mail-address to the clerk.

And this was very unlike Wiggins.

CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNING OF MY ADVENTURE

WIGGINS'S strange conduct and Jewett's dark hints so disturbed me that the very next afternoon I again sought the Asolando Tea-Room, feeling that in its atmosphere I might best weigh the few facts I possessed touching my friend's love-affairs.

Those who care for details in these matters may be interested to know that the Asolando is tucked away among print-shops and exclusive haberdashers, a stone's throw from Fifth Avenue. The Asolando Tea-Room has a history of its own, but it is not the office of this chronicler to record it. Weightier matters are ahead of us; and it must suffice that the Asolando is sacred to wooers of the flute of Pan, secession photographers, and confident believers in an early revival of the poetic drama. One of my friends, who has probably done more to popularize Nietzsche than any other American, had frequently urged me to visit the Asolando, where, he declared, the daintiest imaginable

luncheons could be obtained at nominal prices; but I should not have paid this second visit had it not been for Jewett's history.

It was common gossip in studios where I loafed between my professional engagements, that the monthly deficit at the Asolando was cared for by a retired banker whose weakness is sonnet-sequences. As to the truth of this I have no opinion. It will suffice if I convey in the fewest possible lines a suggestion of the tranquillity, the charming cloistral peace of the little room, with its Arts and Crafts chairs and tables, its racks of books, its portraits of Browning, Rossetti, Burne-Jones and kindred spirits; nor should I fail to mention the delightful inadvertence with which neatly framed excerpts from the bright page of British song are scattered along the walls. Nowhere else, many had averred, was one so likely to learn of the latest Celtic poet, or of a newly-discovered Keats letter; and lest injustice be done in these suggestions to the substantial scholarly attainments of the habitués, I must record that it was over a cup of tea in the Asolando that Bennett made the first notes for his revolutionary essay on the Sapphic fragments in a dog-eared text still treasured among the Room's memorabilia.

I chose a table, sat down, and suggested (one

does not order at the Asolando) a few articles from the card an attendant handed me.

"We 're out of the Paracelsus ginger-cookies," she replied, "but I recommend a Ruskin sandwich with our own special chocolate. The whipped cream is unusually fine to-day."

She eyed me with a severity to which I was not accustomed, and I acquiesced without parley in her suggestion. Before leaving me she placed on my table the latest minor poet, in green and gold.

It was nearly three o'clock, and there were few customers in the Asolando. At the next table two women were engaged in conversation in the subdued tones the place compelled. I surmised from the amount and variety of their impedimenta and their abstracted air, peculiar to those who partake of lobster salad with an eye on the 4.18, that they were suburbanites. One of them drew from her net shopping-bag several sheets of robin's-egg blue note-paper and began to read. By the jingle of the rhymes and the flow of the rhythm it was clear even to my ignorant lay mind that her offering was a *chant-royale*. When she had concluded her reading her friend silently pressed her hand, and after a subdued debate for possession of the check, they took their departure, bound, I surmised, for

some muse-haunted Lesbos among the hills of New Jersey.

I was now alone in the Asolando. The attending deities in their snowy gowns had vanished behind the screen at the rear of the room; the food and drink with which I had been promptly served proved excellent; even the minor poet in green and gold had held my attention, though imitations of Coventry Patmore's odes bore me as a rule. Near the street, half-concealed behind a mosque-like grill, sat the cashier, reading. A bundle of joss-sticks in a green jar beside this young woman sent a thin smoke into the air. Her head was bent above her book in quiet attention; the light from an electric lamp made a glow of her golden hair. She was an incident of the general picture, a part of a scene that contained no jarring note. A man who could devise, in the heart of the great city, a place so instinct with repose, so lulling to all the senses, was not less than a public benefactor, and I resolved on the spot to purchase and read, at any sacrifice, the sonnet-sequences of the reputed angel of the Asolando.

It was at this moment that the adventure — for it shall have no meaner name — actually began. My eyes were still enjoying the Rossetti-like vision in the cashier's tiny booth,

when a figure suddenly darkened the street door just beyond her. The girl lifted her head. On the instant the lamp-key clicked as she extinguished her light, and the aureoled head ceased to be. And coming toward me down the shop I beheld a lady, a lady of years, who passed the cashier's desk with her eyes intent upon the room's inner recesses. Her gown, of a new fashionable gray, was of the severest tailor cut. Her hat was a modified fedora, gray like the gown, and adorned with a single gray feather. She was short, slight, erect, and moved with a quick bird-like motion, pausing and glancing at the vacant tables that lay between me and the door. Her air of abstraction became her, and she merged pleasantly into the color-scheme of the room. As her glance ranged the wall I thought that she searched for some favorite flower of song among the framed quotations, but I saw now that her gaze was bent too low for this. She appeared to be engaged in a calculation of some sort, and she raised a lorgnette to assist her in counting the tables. The cashier passed behind her unseen and vanished. I heard the newcomer reciting: —

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven;" and at seven her eyes rested upon me with a look that mingled surprise and annoyance. She took

a step toward me, and I started to rise, but she said quickly: —

"I beg your pardon, but this seems to be the seventh table."

"Now that you call my attention to it," I remarked, gaining my feet, "I am bound to concede the point. If by any chance I am intruding" —

"Not in the least. On the other hand I beg

that you remain where you are;" and without further ado she sank into a chair opposite my own.

I tinkled a tiny crystal bell that was among the table-furnishings, and a waitress appeared and handed the lady who had thus introduced herself to my acquaintance a copy of the tiny card on which the articles of refreshment offered by the Asolando were indicated within a border of hand-painted field daisies.

"Never mind that," said the lady in gray, ignoring the card. "You may bring me a caviare sandwich and a cocktail, — a pink one — providing, — providing," — and she held the waitress with her eye, — "you have the imported caviare and your bar-keeper knows the proper frappé of the spirit-lifter I have named."

"Pardon me, madam," replied the waitress icily, "but you have mistaken the place. The Asolando serves nothing stronger than the pure water of its own fount of Castalia; intoxicants are not permitted here."

"Intoxicants!" repeated the old lady with asperity. "Do I look like a person given to intoxication? I dare say your Castalia water is nothing but Croton whose flavor has been destroyed by distillation. You may bring me the sandwich I have mentioned and with it a pot of tea. Yes, thank you; lemon with the tea."

As the girl vanished with the light tread that marked the service of the place, I again made as to rise, but the old lady lifted her hand with a delaying gesture.

"Pray remain. It is not unlikely that we have friends and ideas in common, and as you were seated at the seventh table it is possible that some ordering of fate has brought us together."

She took from me, in the hand which she had now ungloved, the copy of my minor poet, glanced at it scornfully, and tossed it upon the floor with every mark of disdain.

"What species of mental disorder does this place represent?" she demanded.

"It is sacred to the fine arts, apparently; an endowed tea-room, where persons of artistic ideals may come to refresh body and soul. Such at least seems to be the programme. This is only my second visit, but I have long heard it spoken of by artists, poets, and others of my friends."

"I am sixty-two years old, young man, and I beg to inform you that I consider the Asolando the most preposterous thing I have ever heard of in this most preposterous city. And from a casual glimpse of you I feel justified in saying that a man in your apparent physical health might be in better business than frequenting,

in mid-afternoon, a shop that seems to be a remarkably stupid expression of twentieth-century anæmia."

"Attendance here is not compulsory," I remarked defensively.

"If you imply that I must have sought the place voluntarily, let me correct your false impression immediately. I dropped in here for the excellent reason that this shop is the seventh in numerical progression from Fifth Avenue."

"You were not guided by any feeling of interest, then, but rather by superstition?"

"That remark is unworthy of a man of your apparent intelligence. I was born on the seventh of November, and all the great events of my life have occurred on the seventh of the month. If you were to suggest that I am of an adventurous or romantic nature, I should readily acquiesce; but the sevens in my life have been so potent an influence in all my affairs that my belief in that numeral has become almost a religious faith; and if you have been a reader of Scripture you will understand that one does not become a pagan in ascribing to seven all manner of subtle influences."

I was relieved to find that she accepted the tea and sandwiches the waitress had brought without parley. It is with shame I confess that

in the first moments of my encounter I believed her capable of quarreling with a waitress; but she thanked the girl pleasantly, lifting her head with a smile that illumined her face attractively. Her demand for a cocktail had not been wholly convincing as to her sincerity, and I wondered whether she were not playing a part of some kind. She suggested pleasant and wholesome things — tiny gardens with neat borders of box and primly-ordered beds of spicy, old-fashioned pinks before the day of carnations, and the verbenas, heliotrope, and honeysuckle we associate with our grandmothers' taste in floriculture. Or perhaps I strike nearer the gold with an intimation of a sunny window-ledge, banked neatly and not too abundantly in geraniums.

In any event the impression was wholly agreeable. I had to do with a lady and a lady of no mean degree. The marks of breeding were upon her, and she spoke with that quiet authority that is the despair of the vain and vulgar. Her features were small and delicate; her ringless hands were perfectly formed, and both face and hands belied the age to which she had so frankly confessed. She was more than twice my age, and there was not the slightest reason why she should not address me if it pleased her to do so; and her obsession as to the potency of the

numeral seven was not in itself proof of an ill-balanced mind. I recalled that my own mother had, throughout her life, imputed all manner of occult powers and influences to the number thirteen, and I have myself always been averse to walking beneath a ladder. Musing thus, I reached the conclusion that this encounter was very likely the sort of thing that happened to patrons of the Asolando. My time has, however, a certain value, and I began to wonder just how I should escape. I was about to excuse myself when my companion suddenly put down her cup and addressed me with a directness that seemed habitual in her.

"I have formed an excellent opinion of your bringing up from the manner in which you have suffered my advances, if I may so call them. You act and speak like a gentleman of education. I imagine from your being in this strange place that you may be a water-colorist or a designer of *l'art-nouveau* wall-papers, though I trust for your own sake that I am mistaken. Or it may be that you are a magazine poet, though when I tell you that I read no poets but Isaiah and Walt Whitman, you will understand that mere verse does not attract me. All this" — and she indicated the mottoes on the wall with a slight movement of the head — "is the sheerest rub-

bish, a form of disease. Will you kindly tell me the nature of your occupation?"

I produced one of my professional cards.

ARNOLD AMES
CONSULTANT IN CHIMNEYS
Suite 92, Landon Building

She read it aloud without glasses and mused a moment.

"This is very curious," she remarked, placing my card in a silver case she drew from her pocket. "This is very curious indeed. It was only yesterday that my friend General Glendenning was speaking of you. He told me that you had rendered him the greatest service in adjusting several flues in his country house at Shinnecock. My own fireplaces doubtless require attention, and you may consider yourself retained. I shall make an early appointment with you. You will find my name and residence sufficiently described on this card."

Miss Hollister
HOPEFIELD MANOR

"Oh!" I exclaimed, bowing. "Any further introduction is unnecessary, Miss Hollister."

"The name is familiar? I recall that General Glendenning mentioned that you were related to the Ames family of Hartford, and your mother was a Farquhar of Charlottesville, Virginia. If you bear your father's name, I dare say it was he whom I met ten years ago in Paris. There is no reason, therefore, why we should not be the best of friends."

She continued to talk as she drew on her gloves, and I saw, as her eyes rested on mine from time to time during this process, that they were the most kindly and humorous eyes in the world. Her face was scarcely wrinkled, but the hair that showed under the small plain hat was evenly and beautifully gray. It was a kind fate indeed that had led me back to the Asolando, and introduced me to the aunt of Wiggins's inamorata.

It may well be believed that I was immediately interested, attentive, absorbed. As she smoothed her gloves, Miss Hollister continued to speak in a low musical voice that was devoid of any of the quavers of age.

"On the day I reached my sixtieth year, Mr. Ames, I decided that my humdrum life must cease. The strictest conventions had guided me

from earliest childhood. My experience of life had been limited to those things which women of education and means enjoy — or suffer, as you please to take it. I resolved that for the years that remained to me I should seek to enjoy myself after my own fashion. To sit in the ingle-nook and knit, with no human companionship but sick kittens, with dull monotony broken only by visits from dutiful clergymen in pursuit of alms for foreign missions, was not for me. Two years ago I chartered a yacht and cruised among the Lesser Antilles, enjoying many adventures. Later I crossed the Andes; and I have just returned from Switzerland, where I accomplished some of the most difficult ascents. I have a clipping bureau engaged to inform me of all rumors of hidden treasure and sunken ships, and I hope that of this something may come, as I retain a marine engineer and corps of divers and can leave at an hour's notice for any likely hunting-ground. This may strike you as the most whimsical self-indulgence. Tell me candidly whether my remarks so affect you."

"If it were not that your benefactions of all kinds have given you noble eminence among American philanthropists, I might be less biased in favor of the sort of thing you describe; but your gifts to orphanages, colleges, hospitals" —

"Ah!" she interrupted; "enough of that. Philanthropy in these times is only selfish exploitation, the recreation of the conscience-stricken. But you see no reason why," she pursued eagerly, "if I wished to dig up the Caribbean Sea in search of Spanish doubloons, I should not do so? Answer me frankly, without the slightest fear."

"I assure you, Miss Hollister, that such projects appeal to me strongly. I have often lamented that my own lot fell in these eventless times. As an architect I proved something of a failure; as a chimney-doctor I lead a useful life, but the very usefulness of it bores me. And besides, many people take me for a sweep."

"I dare say they do, for unfortunately many people are fools. But I am bent upon adventure. It has dawned upon me that every day has its possibilities, that the right turn at any corner may bring me face to face with the most stirring encounters. My age protects me where youth must timidly turn back. My physician pronounces me good for ten years more of active life, and I intend to keep amused. If I were a young man like you, I should crawl through chimneys no more, but take to the open road. I resent the harsh clang of these meaningless years. As I walked among the hills that lie

behind the Manor this morning I heard the bugles calling. Out there in the Avenue at this hour there are miles of fat dowagers in padded broughams who think of nothing but clothes and food. And speaking of food," she continued, with a droll turn, "I am convinced that the caviare in that sandwich was never nearer Russia than Casco Bay."

She drew out her watch, and noting the hour, concluded: —

"Clearly we have much in common. I should like to ask you further as to your unusual profession, but errands summon me elsewhere. However, something tells me we shall meet again."

She rose in her swift bird-like fashion and passed lightly down the room and through the door. She had left a dollar beside her plate to pay her check, which I noted called for only forty cents. I glanced at the cashier's desk. The aureoled head had not reappeared; but immediately I heard a voice murmuring beside me. I had believed myself alone, and in my surprise I thought some wizardry had made audible one of the verses on the wall.

"What of Rafael's sonnets, Dante's picture" —

It was she whose aureoled head I had marked

earlier in the receipt of custom, the girl who had vanished as Miss Hollister appeared. She wore the snowy vestments of the other attending vestals, with the difference that the cap that crowned the waitresses was omitted in her case. This I took to be the Asolando's tribute to her adorable head, which clearly did not need the electric light or other adventitious aid to invoke its lovely glow. The line she had spoken hung goldenly upon the air. She was not tall, and her eyes, I saw, were brown. She had clearly not climbed far the stairway of her years, but her serenity was the least bit disconcerting.

"Pardon me," I began, "but I am an ignorant Philistine, and cannot cap the verse you have quoted."

"There is no reason why you should do so. It is the rule of the Asolando that we shall attract the attention of customers when necessary by speaking a line of verse. We are not allowed to open a conversation, no matter how imperative, with 'Listen,' or the even more vulgar 'Say.'"

"A capital idea, of which I heartily approve, but now that I am a waiting auditor, eager" —

"It's merely the check, if you please," she interrupted coldly. "My desk is closed, and the Room will refuse further patrons for the next

hour, as the executive committee of the Shelley Society meets here at four o'clock and the Asolando is denied to outsiders."

"This, then, is my dismissal? The lady who joined me here for a time left a dollar, which, you will see, is somewhat in excess of her check. My own charge of fifty cents is so moderate that I cannot do less than leave a dollar also."

"Thank you," she replied, unshaken by my generosity. "The tips at the Asolando all go to the Sweetness and Light Club, which is just now engaged in circulating Matthew Arnold's poems in leaflet form in the jobbing district."

"I sympathize with that propaganda," I replied, gathering up my hat and stick, "and am delighted to contribute to its support. And now I dare say you would be glad to be rid of me. The Asolando has tolerated me longer than my slight purchases justified."

I bowed and had turned away, when she arrested me with the line, —

["My good blade carves the casques of men."

I turned toward her. Several of the waitresses were now engaged in rearranging the tables, but they seemed not to heed us.

"Permit me to inquire," she asked, "whether the lady who joined you here expressed any in-

terest in the life beautiful as it is exemplified in the Asolando?"

"I am constrained to say that she did not. She spoke of the Asolando in the most contumelious terms."

The golden head bowed slightly, and a smile hovered about her lips; but her amusement at my answer was more eloquently stated in her eyes.

"I must explain that my sole excuse for addressing you is that we are required to learn, where possible, just why strangers seek the Asolando."

"In the case of the lady to whom you refer, it was a matter of this being the seventh shop from the corner; and my own appearance was due to the idlest curiosity, inspired by enthusiastic descriptions of the Asolando's atmosphere and rumors of the cheapness of its food."

"The reasons are quite ample," was her only comment, and her manner did not encourage further conversation.

"May I ask," I persisted, "whether the Asolando's staff is permanent, and whether, if I return another day" —

"I take it that you do not mean to be impertinent, so I will answer that my service here is limited to Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

On the other days Pippa is in the cash-booth. My name at the Asolando is Francesca."

"I had guessed it might be Lalage or Chloris," I ventured.

She shook her head gravely.

"Kindly write your name in the visitors' book at the door as you pass out."

There was no ignoring this hint. I thought she smiled as I left her.

III

I FALL INTO A BRIAR PATCH

Miss Hollister's summons lay on my desk the next morning and was of the briefest. I was requested to call at Hopefield Manor at four o'clock the following afternoon, being Thursday. A trap would meet me at Katonah, and it was suggested that I come prepared to spend the night, so that the condition of the flues might be discussed and any necessary changes planned during the evening. The note, signed Octavia Hollister, was written in a flowing hand, on a wholly impeccable note sheet stamped Hopefield Manor, Katonah.

Before taking the train I sought Wiggins by telephone at his office, and at the Hare and Tortoise, where he lodged, but without learning anything as to his whereabouts. His office did not answer, but Wiggins's office had never been responsive to the telephone, so this was not significant. The more I considered his conduct during the recital of my visit to the Asolando the more I wondered; and in spite of my wish to ignore utterly Jewett's revelations as to Wig-

gins's summer abroad, I was forced to the conclusion that Jewett had not lied. I had known Wiggins long, and this was the first time that I had ever been conscious of any withholding of confidence on his part; and on my own I had not merely confided all my hopes and aims to him, but I had leaned upon him often in my perplexities. There was, indeed, a kind of boyish compact between us, that we should support each other through all difficulties. This, as I remembered, dated back to our prep school-days and had been reinforced by a fearsome oath, inspired doubtless by some dark fiction that had captivated our youthful imaginations. His failure to tell me of his summer abroad or of his interest in the Hollisters when I had afforded him so excellent an opening by my reference to the Asolando emphasized the seriousness of his plight. His reserve hid, I knew, a diffident and sensitive nature, and it was wholly possible that if his affair with Cecilia Hollister had not prospered he had fled to his ranch there to wrestle in seclusion with his disappointment. My mind was busy with such speculations as I sped toward Katonah, where I found the trap from Hopefield Manor awaiting me.

"It's rather poor going over the hills; about five miles, sir," said the driver, as we set off.

This sort of thing was wholly usual in the nature of my vocation. The flues in country houses seem much more willful and obdurate than those in town, a fact which I have frequently discussed with architects, and I had been met in just this way at many stations within a radius of fifty miles of New York, and carried to houses whose chimneys were provocative of wrath and indignation in their owners.

This was the first week in October. There was just zest enough in the air to make a top coat comfortable. The team of blacks spoke well for Miss Hollister's stable, and the liveried driver kept them moving steadily, but eased the pace as we rose on the frequent slopes to the shoulders of pleasant hills. The immediate neighborhood into which we were wending was unknown to me, though I saw familiar landmarks. I am not one to quibble over the efforts of man to supplement the work of nature, so that I confess without shame that the Croton lakes, to my cockney eye, merge flawlessly into this landscape. It is not for me to raise the cry of utilitarianism against these saucerfuls of blue water, merely because the fluid thus caught and held bubbles and sparkles later in the taps of the Manhattaners. Early frosts had already wrought their miracle in the foliage, and the battle-banners of

winter's vanguard flashed along the horizons. I rejoiced that my business, vexatious enough in many ways, yet afforded me so charming an outing as this.

Presently we climbed a hill that shouldered its way well above its fellows and came out upon a broad ridge, where we entered at once a noble gateway set in an old stone wall, and struck off smartly along a fine bit of macadam. The house, the driver informed me, was a quarter of a mile from the gate. The way led through a wild woodland in which elms and maples predominated; and before this had grown monotonous we came abruptly upon an Italian garden, beyond which rose the house. I knew it at once for one of Pepperton's sound performances; Pepperton is easily our best man in domestic Tudor, and the whole setting of Hopefield Manor, the sunken garden, the superb view, the billowing fields and woodlands beyond, all testified to a taste which no ignorant owner had thwarted. The house was Tudor, but in no servile sense: it was also Pepperton. I lifted my eyes with immediate professional interest to the chimney-pots on the roof. It occurred to me on the instant that I had never before been called to retouch any of Pepperton's work. Pep knew as much as I about flue-construction; I had an im-

mense respect for Pep, and as my specializing in chimneys had been a subject of frequent chaffing between us, I anticipated with a chuckle the pleasure I should have later in telling him that at last one of his flues had required my services.

My good opinion of Miss Hollister did not diminish as I stepped within the broad hall. Houses have their own manner of speech, and Hopefield Manor spoke to all the senses in accents of taste and refinement. A servant took my bag and ushered me into a charming library. A fire smouldered lazily in the great fireplace; there was, in the room, the faintest scent of burnt wood; but the smoke rose in the flue in a perfectly mannerly fashion, and on thrusting in my hand I felt a good draught of air. I instinctively knelt on the hearth and peered up, but saw nothing unworkmanlike: Pepperton was not a fellow to leave obvious mistakes behind him. But possibly this was not one of the recalcitrant fireplaces I had been called to inspect; and I rose and was continuing my enjoyment of the beautiful room, when I became conscious, by rather curious and mixed processes not wholly of the eye, that a young woman had drawn back the light portières — they were dark brown, with borders of burnt orange — and stood gravely

gazing at me. She held the curtains apart — they made, indeed, a kind of frame for her; but

as our eyes met she advanced at once and spoke my name.

"You are Mr. Ames. My aunt expected you. I regret to say that she is not in the house just now, but she will doubtless return for tea. I am her niece. Won't you sit down?"

As she found a seat for herself, I made bold to survey her with some particularity. She carried

her fine height with beautiful dignity. She was a creature of grace, and it was a grace of strength, the suppleness and ease that mark our later outdoor American woman. She could do her miles over these hills, — I was sure of that. Her fine olive face, crowned with dark hair, verified the impression I had gathered from Jewett, that she was a woman of cultivation. She had read the poets; Dante and Petrarch spoke from her eyes. Cecilia was no bad name for her; she suggested heavenly harmonies! And as for Jewett's story of Wiggins's infatuation, I was content: if this was the face that had shattered the frowning towers of Wiggins's Ilium and sent him to brood disconsolate upon his broad acres in Dakota, my heart went out to him, for his armor had been pierced by arrows worthy of its metal.

She was talking, meanwhile, of the day and its buoyant air and of the tapestries hung in the woodlands, in a voice deep with rare intimations of viol chords.

"It's very quiet here. It does n't seem possible that we are so near the city. My aunt chose the place with care, and she made no mistake about it. Yes; the house was built by Mr. Pepperton, but not for us. My aunt bought it of the estate of the gentleman who built it. This will be her first winter here."

She made no reference to the object of my visit, and I wondered if she knew just how I came there. A man-servant wheeled in a portable tea-table and placed it beside a particular chair, lighted the lamp under the kettle, and silently departed. And with the stage thus disposed Miss Hollister herself appeared. She greeted me without surprise and much as she might have spoken to any guest in her house. I had sometimes been treated as though I were the agent of a decorator's shop, or a delinquent plumber, by the people whom I served; but Miss Hollister and her niece established me upon a plane that was wholly social. I was made to feel that it was the most natural thing in the world for me to be there, having tea, with no business ahead of me but to be agreeable. The fact that I had come to correct the distemper of their flues was utterly negligible. I remembered with satisfaction that I had journeyed from town in a new business suit that made the best of my attenuated figure, and I will not deny that I felt at ease.

Miss Hollister talked briskly as she made the tea.

"I was over at the kennels when you came. I believe the kennel-master is a rascal, Cecilia. I have no opinion of him whatever."

"He was highly recommended," replied the

niece. "It's not his fault that the fox terriers were sick."

"I dare say it is n't," said the old lady, measuring the tea; "but it's his fault that he whipped one of those Cuban hounds, — I'm sure he whipped her. The poor beast was afraid to crawl out when I called her this afternoon."

"We were warned against those dogs, Aunt Octavia; but I must admit that they have lovely eyes."

Miss Cecilia's manner toward her aunt left nothing to be desired; it was wholly deferential and kind, and her dignity, I surmised, was equal to any emergency that might rise between them.

"Do you ever shoot behind traps?" demanded Miss Hollister abruptly.

The question surprised me. I did not shoot behind traps or anywhere else, for that matter; but it delighted me to find that her unusual interests, as she had touched upon them at the Asolando, were part of a consistent scheme of life. She talked of her experiments with different guns and traps, her arms folded, her eyes reverting occasionally to the kettle. It was all in the shells, she said. Before she had begun filling her own cartridges she had no end of trouble.

"It is not necessary for you to take tea if you don't care for it, Mr. Ames," she said, as I rose

and handed the first cup to Cecilia. "If you will touch the bell at your elbow you may have liquids of quite another sort. It may interest you to know that this temperance wave that is sweeping the country does not interest me in the least. Our great Americans of the old times were gentlemen who took their liquor with no cowardly fear of public censure. You will find my sideboard well stocked after the fashion of old times; and I have with my own hand placed in your room a quart of Scotch given me at the distillery four years ago by its proprietor, Lord Mertondale. A case of like quality is yours at any moment you choose to press the button at the head of your bed."

"You are most generous, Miss Hollister. Tea will suffice for the moment. It is fitting that I should take it here, it having been a weakness for tea as well as curiosity and chance that threw me in your way at the Asolando."

"That absurd, that preposterous hole in the wall!"

She put down her cup and faced me, continuing: "Mr. Ames, I will not deny that if it had not been for General Glendenning's cordial indorsement of you, and the further fact that I had met your late father, I should not have invited you to my house on the occasion to which you refer.

My contempt for the Asolando and the things it stands for is beyond such language as a lady may use before the young."

I laughed at her earnestness; but on turning toward Miss Cecilia I saw that she was placidly stirring her cup. It might be that one was not expected to manifest amusement in Miss Hollister's utterances; and I was anxious to adjust myself to the proper key in my intercourse, no matter how brief it might be, with this remarkable old lady.

In my embarrassment I rose and offered the bread and butter to Cecilia, who declined it. The austerity of her rejection rather unnerved me.

"To think, that with all the opportunities for adventure that offer in this day and generation, any one should waste time on the idiotic worship of a lot of silly moulders of literary *patisserie!* It is beyond me, Mr. Ames, and when I recall that your late father commanded a cavalry regiment in the Civil War, I fall back upon the privilege of my age to beg that you will hereafter give the Asolando a wide berth."

"I assure you, Miss Hollister, that I have no wish to become an habitué of the place. And yet you will pardon me if I repeat that, but for it, I should not now be enjoying the hospitality of Hopefield Manor."

She lifted her head from her cup and bowed; but I was immediately interested in the fact that her niece was speaking.

"I think Aunt Octavia is hard on the Asolando," she was saying. "Aunt Octavia is interested in the revival of romance, and romance without poetry seems to me wholly impossible. The Asolando makes no pretensions to be more than an incident in a real movement whose aim is the diffusion of poetic fire, — it is merely a shrine where the divine lamp is never allowed to fail or falter."

"And if, Cecilia Hollister, you think that sandwiches named for Browning's poems or macaroons dedicated to Walter Pater can assist foolish virgins in keeping their lamps filled, I give you the word of an old woman that you are in danger of a complete loss of your mind. The age is decadent, and I know no better way of restoring the race to its ancient vim and energy than by sending men back to the camp and field or to sail the high seas in new armadas. The men of this age have become a lot of sordid shopkeepers, and to my moral sense the looting of cities is far more honorable than the creation of trusts and the manipulation of prices, though I cannot deny that but for my late father's zeal in destroying his competitors in the baby-buggy

business we might not now be enjoying the delicate fragrance of caravan tea."

I continued to flounder in my anxiety to determine just how Miss Hollister wished to be taken. She spoke with the utmost seriousness and with the earnestness of deep conviction. If the aims of the Asolando were absurd, what might be said of the declarations of this old lady in favor of a return to the age of sword and buckler!

I again turned to Cecilia, thinking that I should find a twinkle in her eye that might solve the riddle and make easier my responses to her aunt's appeals. Her reply did not help me greatly:—

"I assure you, Mr. Ames, that the Asolando is a very harmless place, and that as a matter of fact its aims are wholly consonant with those of Aunt Octavia. I myself served there for a time, and those were among the most delightful days of my life."

"And you might still be handing about the Rossetti éclairs in that smothery little place if I had not rescued you from your bondage. I assure you, Mr. Ames, that my niece is a perfectly healthy young woman, to whom all such rubbish is really abhorrent."

I expected Miss Cecilia to rouse at this; but she ignored her aunt's fling, saying merely, —

"There are times when I miss the Asolando."

"Mr. Ames," began Miss Octavia presently in her crisp, direct fashion, which had the effect of leading me, in my anxiety to appear ready with answers, to take a flattering view of my own courage and resourcefulness, — "Mr. Ames, are you equal to the feat of swimming a moat under a shattering fire from the castle?"

"I have every reason to think I am, Miss Hollister," I replied modestly.

"And if a white hand waved to you from the grilled window of the lonely tower, would you ride on indifferently or pause and thunder at the gate?"

"White hands have never waved to me, save occasionally when I have gone a-riding in the Sixth Avenue elevated, but it is my honest belief that my sword would promptly leave its scabbard if the hand ever waved from the ivied tower."

She nodded her pleasure in this avowal. For a chimney-doctor I was doing well. In fact, as I submitted to Miss Octavia's examination, I felt equal to charging a brigade single-handed. Something about the woman made it possible and pleasant to be absurd.

"If a king or an emperor of Europe should ask you to inspect his chimneys, would you be con-

tent to perform your service in the most expeditious and professional manner and depart with a nominal fee?"

"Decidedly not, Miss Hollister. On the other hand I should nurse the job for all it was worth, plunder the public treasury, explore the dungeons, make love to the princesses, and free the rightful heir to the throne from his cell beneath the bosom of the lake."

My friends at the Hare and Tortoise would have heard this avowal with some surprise, for no man's life had ever been tamer than mine. I am by nature timid, and fall but a little short of being afraid of the dark. Prayers for deliverance from battle, murder, and sudden death cannot be too strongly expressed for me. My answer had, however, pleased Miss Octavia, and she clapped her hands with pleasure.

"Cecilia," she cried, "something told me, that afternoon at the Asolando, that my belief in the potential seven was not ill-placed, and now you see that in introducing myself to Mr. Ames at the seventh table from the door, in the seventh shop from Fifth Avenue, I was led to a meeting with a gentleman I had been predestined to know."

As we talked further, a servant appeared and laid fresh logs across the still-smouldering fire.

This I thought would suggest to Miss Hollister the professional character of my visit; but the fire kindled readily, the smoke rose freely in the flue; and Miss Hollister paid no attention to it other than to ask the man whether the fuel he had taken from a carved box at the right of the hearth was apple-wood from the upper orchard or cherry from a tree which, it appeared, she had felled herself. It was apple-wood, the man informed her, and she continued talking. The merits of chain-armor, I think it was, that held us for half an hour, Cecilia and I listening with respect to what, in my ignorance, seemed a remarkable fund of knowledge on this recondite subject.

"We dine at seven, Mr. Ames, and you may amuse yourself as you like until that hour. Cecilia, you may order dinner in the gun-room to-night."

"Certainly, Aunt Octavia."

Once more I glanced at the girl, hoping that some glimmer in her eyes would set me right and establish a common understanding and sympathy between us; but she was moving out of the room at her aunt's side. The man who had tended the fire met me in the hall and, conducting me to my room, suggested various offices that he was ready to perform for my comfort. The house

faced south, and my windows, midway of the east wing, afforded a fine view of the hills. The room was large enough for a chamber of state, and its furniture was massive. A four-poster invited to luxurious repose; half a dozen etchings by famous artists — Parrish and Van Elten among them — hung upon the walls; and on a table beside the bed stood a handsome decanter and glasses, reinforced by the quart of Scotch which Miss Hollister had recommended for my refreshment.

My bag had been opened and my things put out, so that, there being more than an hour to pass before I need dress for dinner, I went below and explored the garden and wandered off along a winding path that stole with charming furtiveness toward a venerable orchard of gnarled apple trees. From the height thus gained I looked down upon the house, and caught a glimpse beyond it of one of the chain of lakes, on which the westering sun glinted goldenly. Thus seeing the house from a new angle, I was impressed as I had not been at first by its size: it was a huge establishment, and I thought with envy of Pepperton, to whom such ample commissions were not rare. Pepperton, I recalled a little bitterly, had arrived; whereas I, who had enjoyed exactly his own training for the

architect's profession, had failed at it and been obliged to turn my hand to the doctoring of chimneys. But I am not a morbid person, and it is my way to pluck such joy as I may from the fleeting moment; and as I reflected upon the odd circumstance of my being there, my spirits rose. Miss Hollister was beyond question a singular person, but her whims were amusing. I felt that she was less cryptic than her niece, and the thought of Cecilia drove me back upon Jewett's story of Wiggins's interest in that quarter. I resolved to write to Wiggins when I got back to town the next day and abuse him roundly for running off without so much as good-bye. That, most emphatically, was not like dear old Wiggins!

I had been sitting on a stone wall watching the shadows lengthen. I rose now and followed the wall toward a highway along which wagons and an occasional motor-car had passed during my revery. The sloping pasture was rough and frequently sent me along at a trot. The wall that marked the boundary at the roadside was hidden by a tangle of raspberry bushes, and my foot turning on a stone concealed in the wild grasses, I fell clumsily and rolled a dozen yards into a tangle of the berry bushes. As I picked myself up I heard voices in the

road, but should have thought nothing of it, had I not seen through a break in the vines, and almost within reach of my hand, Cecilia Hollister talking earnestly to some one not yet disclosed. She was hatless, but had flung a golf-cape over her shoulders. The red scarlet lining of the hood turned up about her neck made an effective setting for her noble head.

"Oh, I can't tell you! I can't help you! I must n't even appear to give you any advantage. I went into it with my eyes open, and I 'm in honor bound not to tell you anything. You have said nothing — nothing, — remember that. There is absolutely nothing between us."

"But I must say everything! I refuse to be blinded by these absurd restrictions, whatever they are. It 's not fair, — it 's inviting me into a game where the cards are not all on the table. I 've come to make an end of it!"

My hands had suffered by contact with the briars, and I had been ministering to them with my handkerchief; but I fell back upon the slope in my astonishment at this colloquy. Cecilia Hollister I had seen plainly enough, though the man's back had been toward me; but anywhere on earth I should have known Wiggins's voice. I protest that it is not my way to become an eavesdropper voluntarily, but to dis-

close myself now was impossible. If it had not been Wiggins — but Wiggins would never have

understood or forgiven; nor could I have explained plausibly to Cecilia Hollister that I had not followed her from the house to spy upon her. I should have made the noise of an invading army if I had attempted to effect an exit by creeping out through the windrow of crisp

leaves in which I lay; and to turn back and ascend the slope the way I had come would have been to advertise my presence to the figures in the road. There seemed nothing for me but to keep still and hope that this discussion between Cecilia Hollister and Hartley Wiggins would not be continued within earshot. To my relief they moved a trifle farther on; but I still heard their voices.

"I cannot listen to you. Now that I 'm committed I cannot honorably countenance you at all; and I can explain nothing. I came here to meet you only to tell you this. You must go — please! And do not attempt to see me in this way again."

I was grateful that Wiggins's voice sank so low in his reply that I did not hear it; but I knew that he was pleading hard. Then a motor flashed by, and when the whir of its passing had ceased, the voices were inaudible; but a moment later I heard a light quick step beyond the wall, and Cecilia passed hurriedly, her face turned toward the house. The cape was drawn tightly about her shoulders, and she walked with her head bowed.

I breathed a sigh of relief, and when I felt safe from detection climbed the slope.

Pausing on the crest to survey the landscape,

I saw a man, wearing a derby hat and a light top-coat, leaning against a fence that inclosed a pasture. As I glanced in his direction he moved away hastily toward the road below. The feeling of being watched is not agreeable, and I could not account for him. As he passed out of sight, still another man appeared, emerging from a strip of woodland farther on. Even through the evening haze I should have said that he was a gentleman. The two men apparently bore no relation to each other, though they were walking in the same direction, bound, I judged, for the highway below. I had an uncomfortable feeling that they had both been observing me, though for what purpose I could not imagine. Then once more, just as I was about to enter the Italian garden from a fallow field that hung slightly above it, a third man appeared as mysteriously as though he had sprung from the ground, and ran at a sharp dog-trot along the fence, headed, like the others, for the road. In the third instance the stranger undoubtedly took pains to hide his face, but he, too, was well dressed and wore a top-coat and a fedora hat of current style.

I did not know why these gentlemen were ranging the neighborhood or what object they had in view; but their several appearances had

interested me, and I went on into the house well satisfied that events of an unusual character were likely to mark my visit to the home of Miss Octavia Hollister.

IV

WE DINE IN THE GUN-ROOM

CECILIA sat reading alone when I entered the library shortly before the dinner-hour. She put down her book and we fell into fitful talk.

"I took a walk after tea. I always feel that sunsets are best seen from the fields; you can't quite do them justice from windows," she began.

She seemed preoccupied, but this may have been the interpretation of my conscience, whose twinges reminded me unpleasantly of my precipitation into the briar bushes at the foot of the pasture, where I had witnessed her meeting with Wiggins. My admiration gained new levels. Her black evening gown became her; a band of velvet circled her throat, emphasizing its firm whiteness. It seemed incredible that I had seen her so recently, in the filmy dusk, talking with so much earnestness to Hartley Wiggins. It was my impression, gained from the few sentences I had overheard by the road, that she did not repulse him, but that some mysterious, difficult barrier kept them apart.

Where, I wondered, was Wiggins now, and what were to be the further incidents of this singular affair?

While we waited for Miss Hollister to appear, she continued to speak of her joy in the hills. It is not every one who can admire a sunset with sincerity, but she conveyed the spirit of the phenomena that had attended the lowering of the bright targe of day in terms and tones that were delightfully natural and convincing. And yet the far-away look in her eyes suggested inevitably the scene I had witnessed and the phrases I had caught by the roadside. Wiggins was in her recollection of the glowing landscape, — I was confident of this; and poor Wiggins was even now wandering these hills, no doubt, brooding upon his troubles under the clear October stars.

Dinner was announced the moment Miss Hollister entered, and I walked out between them. Miss Octavia Hollister was a surprising person, but in nothing was she so delightfully wayward as in the gowns she wore. My ignorance of such matters is immeasurable, but I fancy that she designed her own raiment and that her ideas were thereupon carried out by a tailor of skill. At the Asolando and when we had met at tea in her own house, she had worn

the severest of tailored gowns, with short skirt and a coat into whose pockets she was fond of thrusting her hands. To-night the material was lavender silk trimmed in white, but the skirt had not lengthened, and over a white silk waist she wore a kind of cut-away coat that matched the skirt. An aigrette in her lovely white hair contributed a piquant note to the whole impression. As we passed down the hall she talked with great animation of the Hague Tribunal, just then holding a prominent place in the newspapers for some reason that has escaped me.

"The whole thing is absurd; perfectly absurd! I know of nothing that would contribute more to human enjoyment than a real war between Germany and England. The Hague idea is pure sentimentalism, — if sentimentalism can ever be said to be pure. I will go further and say that I consider it positively immoral."

This new view of the matter left me stammering. Cecilia, I saw, had no intention of helping me over these difficult hurdles that were constantly popping up in my conversations with her aunt. This delightful old lady in lavender, the mistress of a house whose luxury and peace were antipodal to any hint of war, continued to baffle me. She had ordered dinner in the gun-

room, but I thought this merely a turn of her humor; and I was taken aback when she led the way into a low, heavily raftered room, where electric sconces of an odd type were thrust at irregular intervals along the walls, which were otherwise hung with arms of many sorts in orderly combinations. They were not the litter of antique shops, I saw in a hasty glance, but rifles and guns of the latest patterns, and beside the sideboard stood a gun-rack and a cabinet which I assumed contained still other and perhaps deadlier weapons. At one end of the room, and just behind Miss Hollister, was a sunburst of swords, which gleamed with a kind of mockery behind her white head.

The small round table was conventionally set, but this only added to the grimness of the encompassing arsenal. A bowl of crimson roses in the centre of the snowy cloth would ordinarily have mitigated the effect of the grim walls; but I confess that the color reminded me a little too sombrely of the ugly business for which this steel had been designed. But for the presence of Miss Cecilia, who was essentially typical of our twentieth-century American woman, I think I might readily have yielded to the illusion that I was the guest of some eccentric chatelaine who had invited me to dine with

her in a bastion of her fortress before ordering me to some chamber of horrors for execution.

There seemed to be no reason why one of those keen blades on the wall might not find its way through my ribs between a highly satisfactory plate of *potage à la tortue* and a bit of sea-bass that would have honored any kitchen in the land. No reference was made to the character of the room; I felt, in fact, that Cecilia rather pleaded with her eyes that I should make no reference to it. And Miss Hollister remarked quite casually as though in comment upon my thoughts: —

"Consistency has buried its thousands and habit its tens of thousands. We should live, Mr. Ames, for the changes and chances of this troubled life. Between an opera-box and a villa at Newport many of my best friends have perished."

"I have thought myself that Thoreau had the right idea," — I began hopefully; but she raised her finger warningly.

"Mr. Ames, the mention of Henry David Thoreau is wholly distasteful to me. A man who will deliberately choose to whittle lead-pencils for chipmunks and write a book about a moist sand-pile like Cape Cod arouses no sympathy in me. And these well-meaning women

who are forever gathering autumn leaves, or who tire you in spring by telling you they have found the first pussy-willow feathering, and who make all Nature odious by their general goo-gooings, bore me to death. There is no such thing possible as the simple life. I give you my word for it that it is only in the most complex existence that the spirit of man can thrive."

I am only a chimney-doctor; I have never been able to make any headway in discussing things æsthetic, sentimental or spiritual with persons of sound conviction in such matters. A bishop with whom I once roamed the English cathedrals confessed to me his sincere belief that in the days of the inquisition the gridiron would have been my rightful portion. I was fearful lest my hostess should suggest the mediæval church as a topic, and this I knew would be disastrous. As an abbess she would, I fancied, have ruled with an iron hand. But with startling abruptness she put down her fork, and bending her wonderfully direct gaze upon me, asked a question that caused me to strangle on a bit of asparagus.

"I imagine, Mr. Ames, that you are a member of some of the better clubs in town. If by any chance you belong to the Hare and Tortoise, — the name of which has always pleased

me, — do you by any chance happen to enjoy the acquaintance of Mr. Hartley Wiggins?"

Cecilia lifted her head. I saw that she had been as startled as I. It crossed my mind that a denial of any acquaintance with Wiggins might best serve him in the circumstances; but I am not, I hope, without a sense of shame, and I responded promptly: —

"Yes, I know him well. We are old friends. I always see a good deal of him during the winter. His summers are spent usually on his ranch in the west. We dined together two days ago at the Hare and Tortoise, just before he left for the west."

"You will pardon me if I say that it is wholly to his credit that he has forsworn the professions and identified himself with the honorable calling of the husbandman."

"We met Mr. Wiggins while traveling abroad last summer," interposed Cecilia, meeting my eyes quite frankly.

"Met him! Did you say met him, Cecilia? On the contrary we found him waiting for us at the dock the morning we sailed," corrected Miss Hollister, "and we never lost him a day in three months of rapid travel. I had never met him before, but I cannot deny that he made himself exceedingly agreeable. If, as I

suspected, he had deliberately planned to travel on the same steamer with my two nieces, I have only praise for his conduct, for in these days, Mr. Ames, it warms my heart to find young men showing something of the old chivalric ardor in their affairs of the heart."

"I 'm sure Mr. Wiggins made himself very agreeable," remarked Cecilia colorlessly.

"For myself," retorted Miss Hollister, "I should speak even more strongly. He repeatedly served us with tact and delicacy; and I recall with the greatest satisfaction his vigorous chastisement of our courier in Cologne, where that person was found to have treated us in the most treacherous manner. He had, in fact, in collusion with an inn-keeper, connived at the loss of our baggage to delay our departure, even after I had pronounced the cathedral the greatest architectural monstrosity in Europe."

"Oh, Aunt Octavia, you did n't really mean that!" And Cecilia laughed for the first time. Her color had risen, and her dark eyes lit with pleasure.

"I had formed so high an opinion of Mr. Wiggins," Miss Octavia continued, "that I learned with sincerest regret that his ancestors were Tories and took no part in the struggle for

American independence. There are times when I seriously question the wisdom of the colonists in breaking with the mother country; but certainly no man of character in that day could have hesitated as to his proper course."

Then, as though by intention, Miss Hollister dropped upon the smooth current of our talk a sentence that drove the color from Cecilia's face. At once the girl was cold again, and I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable that a friend of mine had been brought into the conversation to my befuddlement. The situation was trying, but in spite of this it grew steadily more interesting.

"Hezekiah and Mr. Wiggins were the best of friends," was Miss Hollister's remark.

Cecilia's eyes were on her plate; but her aunt went on in her blithest fashion: —

"You may not know that Hezekiah is another niece, Cecilia's sister. She was named, at my suggestion, for my father, there being no son in the family, and I trust that so unusual a name in a young girl does not strike you as indefensible."

"On the contrary, it seems to me wholly refreshing and delightful. As I recall the Sunday-school of my youth, Hezekiah was a monarch of great authority, whose animosity toward

Sennacherib was justified in the fullest degree. The very name bristles with spears, and is musical with the trumpets of Israel. Nothing would make me happier than to meet the young lady who bears this illustrious name."

"As to your knowledge of ancient history, Mr. Ames," began Miss Hollister, as she helped herself to the cheese, — sweets, I noted, were not included in the very ample meal I had enjoyed, — "it is clear that you were well taught in your youth. I am not surprised, however, for I should have expected nothing less of a son of the late General Ames of Hartford. As to meeting my niece Hezekiah, I fear that that is at present impossible. While Cecilia remains with me, Hezekiah's duty is to her father, and I must say in all kindness that Hezekiah's ways, like those of Providence and the custom-house, are beyond my feeble understanding. In a word, Mr. Ames, Hezekiah is different."

"Hezekiah," added Cecilia with feeling, "is a dear."

"Please don't bring sentimentalism to the table!" cried Miss Hollister. "Mr. Wiggins once informed me in a moment of forgetfulness, — it was at Fontainebleau, I remember, when Hezekiah persisted in reminding a one-armed French colonel who was hanging about that we named

cities in America for Bismarck, — it was there at the inn, that Mr. Wiggins confided to me his belief that Hezekiah bears a strong resemblance to the common or domestic peach. As a single peach at that place was charged in the bill at ten francs, the remark was ill-timed, to say the least. But Mr. Wiggins was so contrite when I rebuked him, that I allowed him to pay for our luncheon, — no small matter, indeed, for Hezekiah's appetite is nothing if not robust."

The table-talk had yielded little light on the subject of Wiggins's predicament, whatever that might be; but these references to the absent Hezekiah had set a troop of interrogation points to dancing on the frontiers of my curiosity. Miss Hollister had given so many turns to the conversation that I could reach no conclusion as to her feeling toward Wiggins or Hezekiah Hollister; and as for Cecilia, I was unable to determine whether she was a prisoner at Hopefield Manor or the willing and devoted companion of her aunt.

In this bewildered state of mind, while we lingered over our coffee, the servant appeared with a card for each of the ladies. I saw Cecilia start as she read the name.

"Mr. Wiggins! How remarkable that he should have appeared just as we were speaking

of him," said Miss Hollister. "Be sure the gentleman is comfortable in the library, James. We shall be in at once. Mr. Ames, you will of course be delighted to meet your friend here, and you will assist us in dispensing our meagre hospitality."

V

THE STRANGE BEHAVIOR OF A CHIMNEY

THERE was no reason in the world why Hartley Wiggins should not call upon two ladies living in Westchester County, and I must say that he appeared to advantage in Miss Hollister's library.

He had got into his evening clothes somewhere, perhaps at a neighboring inn, or maybe at the house of a friend; for he could not possibly have motored into town and back since his interview with Cecilia in the highway. He had impressed the clerk at the Hare and Tortoise with the idea that he had left New York for a long absence, and he had apparently camped at the gates of Hopefield to be near Cecilia.

When he had paid his compliments to the ladies, he turned to me with an almost imperceptible lifting of the brows; but he was cordial enough. If he was surprised or disappointed at seeing me, his manner did not betray the feeling.

"Glad to see you, Ames. Rather nice weather, this."

"Even Dakota could n't do better," I affirmed with a grin; but he ignored the fling.

"It is quite remarkable, Mr. Wiggins, that you should have appeared just when you did, for we had been speaking of you, and I had been telling Mr. Ames of our travels abroad and in particular of the thumping you very properly gave our courier at Cologne. And I shall not deny that I mentioned also our brief discussion of the peach-crop at Fontainebleau."

Cecilia stirred restlessly; Wiggins shot a glance of inquiry in my direction; and I felt decidedly ill at ease. Miss Hollister crossed to the fireplace and poked the logs.

Just what part Hezekiah Hollister played in the situation was beyond me. If I had not witnessed Wiggins's clandestine meeting with Cecilia, matters would have been clearer to my comprehension; but his appearance at the house, after the colloquy I had overheard from the briar patch, was in itself inexplicable. Cecilia was a woman, therefore to be wooed, and yet she had indicated by her words to him that the wooing, independently of her feeling and inclination, might not go forward with entire freedom. Miss Hollister's singular references to

Hezekiah — a person about whom my curiosity was now a good deal aroused — added to the mystery that enfolded the library.

"Our American peaches are not what they were in my youth. Cold storage destroys the flavor. I have not tasted a decent peach for twenty years."

This was pretty tame, I admit; but I felt that I must say something. Responsive to Miss Hollister's energetic prodding, the flames in the fireplace leaped into the great throat of the chimney with a roar. She turned, her back to the blaze, and looked upon her guests benignantly.

"If all your flues draw like that one, they are not seriously in need of doctoring," I remarked, feeling that flues were a safer topic than the peach-crop.

"Flues are nothing if not erratic," replied Miss Hollister. The subject did not appear to interest her; nor had she, by the remotest suggestion, referred to the object of my coming. I had sniffed vainly in the halls above and below for any trace of the stale smoke which usually greeted me at once on my arrival at the house of a client. The air of Hopefield Manor was as sweet as that of a June meadow. Wiggins remarked to me that I doubtless knew the

Manor had been designed by Pepperton, whom we both knew well.

"This is Pep's masterpiece. He need do nothing better to keep his grip at the top," he said.

"I consider it a great privilege to be permitted to visit a house designed by a dear friend and occupied by a lady peculiarly fitted to appreciate and adorn it."

I thought rather well of this as I spoke the words; but neither Cecilia nor Wiggins rose to it as I hoped they might.

"You have a neat turn for the direct compliment," said Miss Hollister promptly. "The house was built, you may not know, for a manufacturer of umbrellas, who died before he had occupied it, in circumstances I may later disclose to you; which accounts, Mr. Ames, for that figure of Cupid under a pink parasol on the drawing-room ceiling. At the first opportunity I shall remove it, as baby Cupids are irreconcilable with the militant love-making I admire. I consider umbrellas detestable, and never carry one when I can command a mackintosh."

"When I 'm on the ranch I wear a slicker," said Wiggins. "It 's bullet-proof, and that I have found at times a decided advantage."

We discussed mackintoshes for at least ten

minutes, with far more sprightliness than I had imagined the subject could evoke. Then Miss Hollister, after a turn up and down the room, paused beside me.

"Mr. Ames," she said, "would you care to join me in a game of billiards? I 'm not in my best form, but I think we might profitably knock the balls for half an hour."

I acquiesced with alacrity. I assumed it to be Miss Hollister's purpose to leave Cecilia and Wiggins alone. I should be rendering Wiggins and Cecilia a service by withdrawing, and I was glad of a chance to escape.

To my infinite surprise they both protested, not in mere polite murmurs but with considerable vehemence.

"It 's quite cool to-night, and I don't believe you ought to use the billiard-room until the plumber has fixed the radiator," said Cecilia.

"And if you knew Mr. Ames's game I 'm sure you would n't care to waste time on him," piped Wiggins, whom I had frequently vanquished in billiard bouts at the Hare and Tortoise, where, I may say modestly, I had long been considered one of the most formidable of the club's players.

Both he and Cecilia had risen, and we stood, I remember, just before the hearth, during this

exchange. At this moment, a singular thing happened. The fire that had been sweeping in a broad wave-like curve into the chimney was checked suddenly. I had repeatedly marked the admirable draught, the facile grace of the flame as it rose and vanished. The cessation of the draught was unmarked by any of those premonitory symptoms by which a fire usually gives warning of evil intentions. The upward current of air had ceased utterly and without apparent cause. We were all aware of a choking, a gasping in the deep flue, which could not be accounted for by any natural stoppage incident to chimneys — the dislodging of masonry, or a packing of soot. The former was hardly possible and the house was not old enough to make the latter theory plausible. From my survey of the flue on my arrival in the afternoon, I judged that this particular chimney had been little used.

The smoke now rolled out in billows and drove us back from the hearth. I seized the tongs and poker and began readjusting the logs, without, however, any hope of correcting a difficulty that lay patently in the upper regions of the flue itself. The smoke, after a courageous effort to rise, encountered an obstruction of some sort and ebbed back upon the hearth and out into the room. My efforts to stop the trouble

by shifting the logs were futile, as I expected them to be, and I retreated quickly, making, I

fear, no very gallant appearance as I mopped my face and eyes.

"Well," exclaimed Miss Hollister, who had rung for a servant to open the doors and windows, "this is certainly most extraordinary. What solution do you offer, Mr. Ames?"

"The matter requires investigation. I can't venture an opinion until I have made a thor-

ough investigation. The night is perfectly quiet and the wind is hardly responsible. I think we had better abandon the room until I can solve this riddle in the morning."

The prompt opening of the windows and doors caused the slow dispersion of the smoke, but the lights in the room still shone dimly as through a fog.

"It 's beastly," ejaculated Wiggins, coughing. "I did n't suppose Pepperton would put a flue like that into a house. He ought to be shot."

"It is fortunate," said Miss Hollister, "that Mr. Ames is on the ground. He now has a case that will test his most acute powers of diagnosis."

The logs that had burned so brightly before the chimney choked still held their flames stubbornly, and I had advised against pouring water upon them, fearing to crack the brick and stonework. We were about to adjourn to the drawing-room; Miss Hollister and the others had in fact reached the door, leaving me alone before the hearth. Then, as I stood half-blinded watching the smoke pour out into the room, and more puzzled than I had ever been before in any of my employments, the chimney, with a deep intake of breath, began drawing the smoke upward again; the flames caught and

spread with renewed ardor; and when the trio still loitering in the hall returned in answer to my exclamation of surprise, the flue had recovered its composure and was behaving in a sane and normal manner.

There is, I imagine, nothing pertaining to the life of man (unless it be rival climates, motor-cars or pianos) that so inspires incompetent, irrelevant and immaterial criticism as wayward fireplaces. It is part of my business to listen respectfully to opinions, to receive with an appearance of credulity the theories of others; and those advanced in Miss Hollister's library were not below the average to which I was accustomed.

"A swallow undoubtedly fell into the chimney-pot and then got itself out again," suggested Cecilia.

"The logs must have been wet. The sap had n't dried out yet," proposed Wiggins.

"The wood was as dry as tinder," averred Miss Hollister, not without irritation. "And one swallow does not make a summer or a chimney smoke. It must have been a changing current of air. I was reading a book on ballooning the other day, and it is remarkable how the air currents change."

"That is quite possible, as the air cools rap-

idly after sunset at this season, and that is bound to have an effect on the quality and resistance of the atmosphere," I replied sagely.

"Perhaps," suggested Miss Hollister, with one of those flashes of animation that were so delightful in her, "perhaps it was a ghost! Will you tell us, Mr. Ames, whether in your experience you have ever known a chimney ghost?"

As I had no opinion of my own as to what had caused the chimney's brief aberration, I was glad to follow Miss Hollister's lead.

"I have had several experiences with ghosts," I began, "though I should not like you to think that I profess any special genius for the analysis of psychical phenomena. But there was a house at Shinnecock that was reputed to be haunted. The living-room chimney behaved damnably. The house was one of Buffington's. Buffington, you know, was quite capable of building a house and omitting any stairway. We used to say at the club that he ought to have specialized in fire-engine houses, where the men don't use stairways but slide down a pole. Well, the living-room chimney in this particular house could n't be made to draw with a team of elephants, and it had also the reputation of being haunted. Strange flutings of the weirdest and most distressing kind were often heard at night. The owner gave up

in despair and moved out, turning the house over to me. After eliminating all other possibilities, I decided that the piping spook must be related to the disorder in the chimney. It served two fireplaces, and I proceeded to knock the kinks out of it so it did n't tie knots in a plumb-line as at first; but, believe me, when it stopped smoking it still whistled, in the most fantastical fashion. I was living in the house, with only the servants about, and for a week gave my whole thought to this flue. The ghostly flutist was an amateur, but he tried his hand at every sort of tune, from 'Sally in our Alley' to the jewel song in Faust. The whistling did n't begin till nearly midnight, and continued usually for about an hour. I tried in every way to lure him into the open, and I fell downstairs one night as I crept about in the dark trying to trace the sound. And to what palpable and mundane source do you suppose I traced that ghost?"

"I never should guess," murmured Cecilia, "unless it was merely the weird whistling of the wind."

"Nothing so poetical, I 'm sorry to confess. It was the butler! In his nightly cups his soul inclined to music, and being a timid soul, fearful of the cynical tongues of the other servants, he crawled into the ash-dump in the cellar,

which communicated with the several fireplaces above, and there indulged himself gently upon the tuneful reed. The night I caught him he was breathing the wild strains of Brunhilde's Battle-Cry into the tube, and it was shuddersome, I can tell you! I took it upon myself to discharge him on the spot, and the grateful owner returned the next day."

"The presence of a ghost in this house would give me the greatest pleasure," declared Miss Hollister, who had listened intently to my recital. "I should look upon a ghost's appearance at Hopefield Manor as a great compliment. If any reputable, decent ghost should by any chance take up his residence in this house, I should give him every encouragement."

Miss Hollister seemed to have forgotten the proposed game of billiards. The chimney's lawless demonstration had, in fact, given a new turn to the evening. We discussed ghosts for half an hour, and then, without having enjoyed any opportunity for a single private word with Cecilia, Wiggins rose to leave. He shook hands all around and bowed from the door. It was in my mind to follow, making a pretext of walking with him to the station or of helping him find his car; but nothing in his good-night to me encouraged such attentions, and as I pon-

dered, the outer door closed upon my irresolution.

At the stroke of ten Miss Hollister rose and excused herself. "We breakfast at eight, Mr. Ames. I trust the hour does not conflict with your habits."

I assured her that the hour was wholly agreeable, and she gave me her hand with great dignity.

When I turned toward Cecilia she had moved to a seat close by the hearth and was gazing dreamily into the fire, now a bed of glowing coals.

"It was odd," I remarked.

"You mean the chimney?"

"Yes. It was quite unaccountable. I confess that I never knew a chimney's mood to change so abruptly."

She sat silent for several minutes, and then she lifted her head and her eyes met mine.

"Pardon me, Mr. Ames, but did my aunt ask you here to examine the chimneys? I did n't quite understand. We have been here only a week; the weather has been warm, and I believe this fire had not been lighted before today. You will pardon my frankness, but I can't quite understand why my aunt invited you here if you came professionally. I thought when you appeared this afternoon that you were a guest — nothing more — or less."

"You had heard nothing of any trouble with the fireplaces? Then I am in the dark as much as you. As I understood it, I was called here to examine the flues; but now that I think of it, she did not say explicitly that her chimneys were behaving badly, though that was of course implied. I naturally assumed that she summoned me here in my professional capacity. I was a stranger to your aunt; she would hardly have invited me otherwise."

She turned again to the fire as though referring to it for counsel. Her perplexity was no greater than my own. It was certainly an extraordinary experience to be invited to a strange house where my services had not been needed, and to find that an apparently sound chimney had begun to smoke at once as though in mockery of my presence.

"I imagine, however, that your aunt acts a good deal on impulse. Her asking me here may have been only a whim."

"Please don't imagine that your coming has not been agreeable to me," Cecilia protested. "My aunt is quite capable of inviting a stranger to the house. She met you, I believe, at the Asolando. I hope you understand that it is only because I am in deep trouble, Mr. Ames, trouble of the gravest nature, that I have ventured to

speak to you in this way of my aunt, for whom I have all respect and affection."

She had never, I was sure, been lovelier than at this moment. Her eyes filled, but she lifted her head proudly. Whatever the trouble might be I was sorry for it on her own account; and if it involved Hartley Wiggins my sympathy went out to him also. On an impulse I spoke of him.

"I was surprised to meet Hartley Wiggins here. He 's a dear friend of mine, you know. I thought he had gone to his ranch. He left the Hare and Tortoise very abruptly a few nights ago just after we had dined together. He must be stopping somewhere in the neighborhood."

"It 's quite possible. And there 's an inn, you know. I fancy he drove over from there."

"I had n't thought of that; the Prescott Arms, I suppose you mean."

She nodded, but she was clearly not interested in me, and when I found myself failing dismally to divert her thoughts to cheerfuller channels, I rose and bade her good-night.

The servant who had previously attended me appeared promptly when I reached my room, bearing a tray, with biscuits and a bottle of ale. He gave me an envelope addressed in a hand

I already knew as Miss Octavia's, and I opened and read: —

"The following I either detest or distrust, so kindly refrain from mentioning them while you are a guest of Hopefield Manor: —

Automobiles.
Mashed Potatoes.
Whiskers.
Chopin's Concerto in E Minor (op. 11).
Bishops Coadjutor.
Limericks.
Cats.

Octavia Hollister."

I absorbed this with a glass of ale. There were seven items, I noted, and I had no serious quarrel with her attitude toward any of them; but just what these matters had to do with me or my presence in her house I could not determine. She had referred to me in the note as a guest — I had noted that; and I did know, moreover, that Miss Octavia Hollister possessed a quaint and delicate humor; and I looked forward with the pleasantest anticipations to our further meetings.

Before I slept I threw up my window and stepped out upon a narrow balcony that afforded a capital view of the fields and woods to the east. The night was fine, with the sky bright with stars and moon. As my eyes dropped

from the horizon to the near landscape, I saw a man perched on a knoll in the midst of a corn-field. He stood as rigid as a sentry on duty, or like a forlorn commander, counting the spears of his tattered battalions. I was not sure that he saw me, for the balcony was slightly shadowed, but at any rate, he was sharply outlined to my vision. His derby hat and overcoat gave him an odd appearance as he stood brooding above the corn. Then he vanished suddenly, though, as he retired toward the highway, I followed him for some time by the shaking and jerking of the corn-stalks.

I lay awake far into the night, considering the events of the day. Of these the curious stoppage of the library chimney was the least interesting. I doubted whether it would ever recur. The love-affair of Hartley Wiggins was, however, a matter of importance to me, his friend, and I determined to make every effort to see him the next day and learn the exact status of his affair with Cecilia Hollister.

VI

I DELIVER A MESSAGE

I WAS aroused at six o'clock the next morning by the sound of gun-shots, and springing out of bed I beheld, in an open pasture beyond the stable-yard, the indomitable Miss Hollister engaged in the pleasing pastime of breaking clay pigeons with a fowling-piece. Her Swedish maid stood by with a formidable pad of paper, keeping score. A boy pulled the trap for her, and she threw up her gun and blazed away with a practised hand. Her small, slight, tense figure, awaiting the launching of the target, the quick up-bring of the gun as she sighted, and the pause, following the firing of the shot, in which she bent forward rigidly watching the result, were features of a picture which I would not have missed. My eye could not follow the curving disc in its flight, but when the shot told, the bursting clay made a little patch of dust in the air that was plainly visible from where I sat. Beyond the stable-roofs, on a broad stretch of pasture whose aftermath made a green field about her, and against a background of the

more distant woods' tapestry, Miss Octavia Hollister was a figure to admire. And I will

write it down here and be done with it, that it has been my good fortune to know many delightful women, but I have never known one more interesting or charming than Miss Octavia Hollister. The spirit of deathless youth was in her heart; and youth's gay pennants fluttered

about her, as the reports of her gun fell cheerily upon the crisp morning air, a rebuke and a challenge to all indolent souls.

I made myself presentable as quickly as possible and went forth to report to her. She nodded pleasantly as I greeted her immediately after she had scored a capital shot. A second gun was produced, and I saw that it was not without satisfaction that she observed my lack of prowess. One out of five was the best I could do, whereas she smashed three with the greatest ease.

On alternate mornings, she informed me, she shot glass balls with a rifle, a sport which she declared to be superior to pigeon-shooting in the severity of its demand upon the nerve and eye.

"If I had known you would be up so early I should have sent coffee to your room," she remarked as we walked toward the house. "Very likely your lack of luck with the birds is attributable entirely to the impoverished state of your stomach."

Breakfast was served on a delightful sun-porch that I had not before seen. Cecilia appeared promptly, having in fact been gathering fall flowers for some time, I judged, from the considerable armful of chrysanthemums, asters, dahlias and marigolds, which we found

her arranging for the table. She seemed in excellent spirits, and greeted us most amiably.

"I heard the artillery booming and thought an army had descended. It 's a great regret to me, Mr. Ames, that I have never been able to make any headway at the traps. I suffer from chronic and incurable gun-shyness. I 'm sorry archery has gone out. I think I might have done better with the long bow."

"Pinkle!" exclaimed Miss Hollister disdainfully. "I cured myself of gun-shyness easily enough by having the gardener follow me about whenever I took my daily walks, firing a gun at irregular intervals just behind me. I was threatened with deafness when I began, but the agitation of my tympanums by the explosions of my gun has corrected the difficulty. I have mentioned my discovery of this remedy to a distinguished aurist, and he is preparing a paper on the subject — not, however, without my permission — which he expects to read shortly before one of the most learned societies in Europe. Cecilia, the chops are overdone again; please remind me to speak to the cook about it. If it were not that he is so expert in detecting spurious steam-mill corn-meal, which is constantly sold as a substitute for the Boydville water-ground article, I should discharge him for this. An ill-

broiled chop can do much to shake one's faith in human nature. If I wanted to eat grilled patent leather I should order it."

In spite of her sharp observations it was quite clear to me that Miss Hollister's was the gentlest and sweetest of natures. I fully believed that her whims were the honest expression of a revolt against the tedious and conventional, and nothing in my later acquaintance disturbed this opinion. It was her privilege to do as she liked, and if she preferred cracking clay saucers with a shot-gun to knitting or darning stockings or gossiping, it was no one's business.

The mail arrived and was placed by her plate before we left the table. She opened first a bulky envelope containing cuttings from a clipping bureau, and she mused aloud upon these as she read.

"This persistent story of a sunken galleon off the Bolivian coast sounds plausible, but I fear it is the work of some bright young journalist. Our minister in that benighted country does n't take any stock in it. I had a cable from him yesterday. If he had given the story credence I should have gone down at once with a steamer and crew of divers. The imaginative young newspaper men continue romancing, however; and it costs me five cents a clipping."

She next opened a letter that roused her to vigorous declamation.

"Cecilia," she began, "here is a letter from that Mrs. Stanford we met in Berne. She encloses a card that indicates her wish to be called Mrs. Appleby now, having, I believe, spent a few months since our meeting in one of our American States where the marital tie readily evaporates, and shaken Stanford, whom I have heard spoken of in the highest terms by persons of character. We live in an era of horseless carriages, wireless telegraphy, husbandless wives and wifeless husbands. I have hit upon a formula which I am tempted to utilize hereafter when I meet husbandless women. When they are introduced I shall ask: —

Shaken,
Or taken?

signifying in the first instance a loss by way of Nevada, or, in the second, through the pearlier gates of that Paradise which is the hope of us all. Mr. Ames, as the butler has gone to sleep in the pantry, you will kindly pass the salt."

She had handed Cecilia a number of letters, which the girl opened and then to my surprise meekly turned over to her aunt. Miss Hollister surveyed them critically.

"I thought," she remarked, "that that young Henderson who was so attentive to you at Madrid was an impostor, and this note settles the matter. He flirted outrageously with Hezekiah behind your back. He asks if he may call upon you here. If he were the nephew of Colonel Abner Henderson of Roanoke, as he represented himself to be, he would not ask if he might call upon you, but would have appeared at once in his proper person to pay his addresses. An unchivalrous and wobbly character, who evidently expects you to make the advances. But such are the youth of our time. And besides, Cecilia, his stationery leaves much to be desired. As for these other gentlemen we need not discuss them. Their actions must speak for them."

Miss Hollister, having thus dismissed her niece's correspondents, rose and led the way to the library. Cecilia seemed in no wise depressed by her aunt's fling at Mr. Henderson, whoever he might be, but threw the notes upon the flames that blazed merrily in the fireplace.

I suggested immediately that as I had come to Hopefield Manor to inspect the flues I should now be about my business; but to my surprise Miss Hollister evinced no interest whatever in the matter. Her tone and manner implied that

the condition of her chimneys was wholly negligible.

"There is no haste, Mr. Ames. I have suffered all my life from the ill-considered and hurried work of professional men. Even the clergy — and I have enjoyed the acquaintance of many— are quite reckless in giving opinions. I once asked the Bishop of Waxahaxie — was it Waxahaxie, Cecilia, or Tallahassee? — well, it does n't matter anyhow — whether he honestly believed there are no women angels. He replied with unusual frankness for one in holy orders that he did n't know, but added that he was sure there are angel women. Just for that impertinence I cut in two my subscription to his cathedral building-fund. When I ask an expert opinion of an educated person I don't intend to be put off with mere persiflage. And to return to my chimneys, I beg that you give me the result of your most serious deliberations. At this hour I ride; Cecilia, will you dress immediately and accompany me?"

She disappeared at once and I stared mutely after her. I am by no means an idler, and this cool indifference to the value of my time would ordinarily have enraged me; but I believe I laughed, and when I turned to Cecilia I found her smiling.

"I 'm glad, Mr. Ames, that you are a person of humor. My aunt's conduct verifies what I said to you last night — that the flues in this house have given us no trouble; that they have indeed had little chance to do so in the short time we have spent here. It is true that this one acted queerly last night, and I have wondered about its temporary sulkiness a good deal. It will be well, of course, for you to go over it, and all the others in the house. It is no joke that my aunt is a believer in thoroughness, and one of these days, when she is ready to talk of chimneys, she will subject you to a most rigid examination."

"One of these days? Why, I have looked at the time-table, and it is my present intention to take the 12:03 into town. I have appointments at my office for the afternoon. I assure you, Miss Hollister, that I 'm a man of engagements, particularly at this season."

I remembered what Jewett had told me of Fortner, the painter, and his detention at Newport by Miss Octavia Hollister. I had no intention of being immured in any such fashion, and I was about to protest further when Cecilia took a step toward me, and after a glance at the door spoke in a low tone and with great earnestness.

"Mr. Ames, I have every reason to believe that you are a gentleman, and in that confident belief I 'm going to ask a favor of you. You have said that you know Mr. Hartley Wiggins well."

"I know no man better. You might not have inferred it from his manner last night, but he was undoubtedly surprised and embarrassed by my presence, and did not act quite like himself."

"I think I understand the cause of that. If I should ask you to see him to-day and give him a message for me, could you do so?"

"It will be an honor to serve you; and a very simple matter, as I should see him on my own account if he is still in the neighborhood."

"He is doubtless at the Prescott Arms. My message is a verbal one. Please urge him not to make any effort to see me, and not to call here again. But at the same time, as the chimney smoked just as we were about to be left alone last night, I think — I think" — she hesitated a moment — "You may say that his interests have not been jeopardized by his temerity in calling."

In her pause before concluding this curious commission her eyes searched mine deeply, and I felt that she had not lightly entrusted me with

this singular errand. Her dark eyes held mine an instant after she had spoken; then she smiled, and her face showed relief.

"Ask for anything you want. Aunt Octavia despises motors, so there 's no car here, but you will find plenty of horses and traps. Order whatever pleases you. I shall expect to meet you at dinner if not at luncheon — and so" — she smiled again — "will Aunt Octavia."

She nodded to me from the door, and I heard her running lightly upstairs.

Left to my own devices I rang the bell and ordered the library fire extinguished and the hearth cleaned. This required a little time; but the house man obeyed me readily, and soon, clad in my professional overalls and jumper, I was going carefully over the flue whose behavior had been so unaccountable the previous night. Guided by the servant I inspected the three fireplaces in the upper chambers that were served by flues in this chimney and finally dropped my torch and plumb-line from the chimney-pot. Never in all my experience had I seen better flues; but remembering my ghost at Shinnecock, I had the ashes thrown out of the dump in the cellar and found the chute in perfect order. I learned by inquiry that the other flues worked perfectly, but I nevertheless scrutinized them carefully.

My freedom of the house afforded an excellent opportunity for a study of its beautiful construction. It was modern in every sense, with no dark, mysterious corners in which goblins might lurk. I prowled about with increasing admiration for Pepperton, and with a deepening sense of my own failure in the art which he adorned.

My professional labors were finished. I was quite ready for Miss Hollister's most searching inquiries. As for the library flue, I had decided that a little care in piling the logs in the hearth would obviate the possibility of any recurrence of the difficulty. And I thereupon hurried to my room, and after a tub (my vocation encouraged frequent tubbing) chose from the stable a neat trap for one horse. Thus equipped I set out to find Wiggins.

The Prescott Arms is an inn that sprang into being with the advent of motoring. The tourist is advised of his approach to it by signs swung at the crossways, and its plaster and timber walls are in plain sight from one of the excellent state roads. Gasoline and other liquids are offered there; one may have tea or an ampler meal on short notice; and a few guests may be lodged in case of necessity. I remembered it well, having several times found it a haven on

motor-flights with friends. As I drove into the entrance I saw Wiggins pacing the long veranda.

He waved a hand and came out to meet me, and when I had rid myself of the trap he suggested that we take a walk.

His manner was not cordial, and he wore the haggard look of a man on bad terms with his pillow. I attributed his appearance to preoccupation with his love-affair. When we had

withdrawn a little way from the inn he turned on me sharply.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Well," I laughed.

"Oh, you need n't take that tone about it! Your being here is something that requires explanation; and your being *there*" — he flung out his arm toward Hopefield Manor — "your presence there is not a laughing matter."

"My dear Wiggins, I came here in a spirit of friendship, and you treat me like a pickpocket. I must say that if you had not acted like a clam the other night at the club, but had told me what was in the wind, we might not be meeting now like ancient enemies instead of old and intimate friends."

He vouchsafed no reply, but threw himself down under a scarlet maple and began to whittle a stick, while I went on with my story.

"I met Miss Octavia Hollister in the Asolando the day after our last dinner at the club. I had dropped into the tea-room merely to look at the place again. I had never seen her before in all my life. She is a whimsical old lady— but a lady, you must admit that — and we exchanged cards. On learning my occupation she at once declared that I must come up here to look at her chimneys. She made an appoint-

ment by mail for yesterday afternoon. It is not my fault that she treated me like a guest, or that she introduced me of necessity to her niece Cecilia. And now I have finished my work, and after I have made my report I shall probably not meet her again. As for Miss Cecilia Hollister, I can only say, my dear Wiggins, that she is a rarely beautiful woman, and that if you wish to marry her you have my very best wishes for your success and happiness."

"It struck me that you were pretty well established there," he blurted. "I confess that I took it for granted you were not there wholly on a professional errand; and I won't deny, Ames, that I was not pleased to see you."

"You honor me in assuming that I might aspire to the hand of so splendid a woman as Cecilia Hollister; but, my dear Wiggins, I tell you I never laid eyes on her until last night."

"But you had been to the Asolando," he persisted, hacking away doggedly at his stick.

"Of course I had. I told you I had. I told you the whole story. But I did not see Cecilia Hollister there. She was n't there! I fancy that after you saw her there last spring and became infatuated with her and followed her to Europe instead of going to Dakota to harvest your blooming wheat — after that bit of history she

never returned to the Asolando. Your lack of frankness in all this has pained me. And you left it for a gossiping chap like Jewett to tell me the whole story. And to cap your duplicity you sneaked out of the club the other night while Jewett was talking to me and let the club people think you were bound for your ranch. I call it rather low down, Wiggins, after all the years we have known each other. My slate is clean; how about yours?"

He threw the stick at a sparrow whose chirp irritated him from a stone fence beyond us, and turned toward me a countenance on which dejection, humiliation, and chagrin were written large.

"Damn it all!" he bellowed, "I believe I 'm losing my mind. I don't know what I 'm doing. That old woman up there is responsible for all this. She 's as crazy as a March hare, — crazier! And she 's made a prisoner of that girl. I tell you Cecilia Hollister is the grandest girl in the world."

"Go it, son! Those descendants of Cæsar's legions at work in the road down there are pausing to listen. Try to affect calmness if you don't feel it. I agree to all you say of Miss Cecilia. And please get it into your noddle that I have no intention of becoming your rival for her hand.

But I must beg of you also not to speak in such terms of her aunt. She 's the most delightful woman I ever met."

"Mad, I tell you, quite mad!"

"Wise, — with the most beautiful wisdom; you simply don't understand her."

"I know all I want to about her. If she were not insane she would not build a wall of mystery about her niece and keep me camping out here not knowing where I stand. I tell you, Ames, that woman is a malevolent being; she 's perfectly fiendish."

There is no way of answering a man in this humor save by laughter; and I laughed long and loud, to the consternation of the Italian road-laborers who were now swallowing their luncheons a short distance away from us.

Wiggins sulked awhile and then addressed me seriously.

"I did n't tell you I was going abroad, because the situation made explanations difficult. I could hardly tell you that I was about to race over Europe after a waitress I had seen in a tea-room. You 're always so confoundedly suspicious. It would have an odd sound even now if she were — well, if she were a waitress instead of what you know her to be. And my animosity toward Miss Octavia Hollister is due to the fact

that after I had been as courteous to her all summer long as I could, and thought myself tolerably established in her mind as a decent person and a gentleman, she suddenly shuts Cecilia up in that house, — bought it on purpose, I fancy, — and Cecilia herself is compelled to take on an air of mystery, warning me to keep away, suggesting the darkest possibilities, but giving me no hint whatever of the reason for her conduct."

"Let us confine ourselves to Miss Octavia for a moment. While you were acting as cavalier to her party abroad she was friendly; then she suddenly changed. Now there must be some explanation of that."

"Well, for one thing, she flew off at a tangent about my ancestors. We were in Berlin on the Fourth of July and got to talking about the American revolution. She asked me what my people had done for the patriotic cause. The painful fact is that most of them were Tories ; but my great-grandfather broke with his father and brothers, joined Washington's army, and fought through the whole business. But to save the feelings of the rest of them, who went to England till it was all over, he changed his name. There's no mention of him in the war records anywhere. I've had experts working on it, but they can't find any

trace of him. He was greatly embittered by the estrangement from his people, and though he had a farm in this very neighborhood somewhere — I've thought sometime I'd look it up and try to get hold of it — he never mentioned his military experiences even to his own children. Usually Miss Hollister changes front if you give her time. I've heard her say that we'd have been better off if we'd never broken with England; but she persists in prodding that weak place in my armor."

"That's very dark, Wiggy. If she keeps it up you'll have to dig up your great-grandfather someway. The spiritualists might call him on long distance. But let us turn to Miss Cecilia. I don't for a moment believe that she is a victim of ancestor worship. The perambulator rampant adorns the Hollister shield to the exclusion of everything else. From what you say Cecilia has not repelled you; on the other hand she has frankly given you to understand that you must not press your suit at this time for reasons she sees fit to withhold. A little more patience, a little calm deliberation and less violent language, and in due course the girl is yours. Now what do you fancy is the cause of Cecilia's abrupt change of attitude?"

He refused to meet my eyes, but turned away

as though to conceal an embarrassment whose cause I could not surmise. When he spoke it was in a voice husky with emotion.

"Am I a cad? Am I beneath the contempt of decent people?"

"It 's possible, Wiggy, that you are. Go on with it."

"Well, you know," he began diffidently, "Cecilia has a sister."

I grinned, but his scowl brought me to myself again.

"Yes. And her name is Hezekiah. The name pleases me."

"She was with Miss Octavia in her gallop over Europe, so I saw a good deal of her necessarily. She is younger than Cecilia; she 's a good deal of a kid, — the sort that never grows up, you know."

"Just like her aunt Octavia!"

"Bah! Don't mention that woman. Hezekiah is a very pretty girl; and I suppose, — well, when you are thrown with a girl that way, seeing her constantly" —

I clapped my hand on his knee as the light began to dawn upon me.

"You old rascal, you don't need to add a single word! I dare say you are guilty. I can see it in your eye. After waiting till you reached

years of discretion before beginning an attack upon womankind, you began mowing them down in platoons. So they come running now that you 've got a start. Oh, Wiggy, and I believed you immune! And you 're trying to drive 'em tandem."

The thing was funny, knowing Wiggins as I did, and I gave expression to my mirth; but his fierce demeanor quickly brought me back to the serious contemplation of his difficulty.

"That, you shameless wretch, would be a sufficient reason for Miss Octavia's aloofness, — your double-faced dealing with her nieces? You confirm my impression that she is a wise woman. And Cecilia, I take it, may be deeply embarrassed by her sister's infatuation for you. You certainly have made a tangle of things, you heart-wrecker, you conscienceless deceiver! But where, may I ask, does this Hezekiah keep herself?"

"Oh, she 's with her father. They have a bungalow over the hills there, several miles from Hopefield Manor."

"Well, I hope you are no longer toying with her affections. Of course you don't see her any more?"

"Well," he mumbled, "I did see her this morning. But I could n't help it. It was the

merest chance. I met her in the road when I was out taking a walk. She 's always turning up, — she 's the most unaccountable young person."

"I suppose, Wiggy, that if you stand in the road and Miss Hezekiah Hollister strolls by on her way to market, you fancy that she is pursuing you. As Miss Octavia has well said, this is not a chivalrous age. I 'm deeply disappointed in you. Your conduct and your attitude toward this trusting young girl are disgraceful."

He rose and flung up his arms despairingly. It was much easier to laugh at Wiggins than to be angry at him; but I recalled the message which Cecilia had entrusted to me, and this, I thought, might give him some comfort.

"Miss Cecilia asked me this morning to say to you that you must not try to see her again; you must keep away from the house."

This obviously increased his dejection.

"But," I added, "I was to say that she thought nothing had yet occurred to interfere with your ambitions, as you were not permitted to see her alone last night. The chimney, you may remember, began playing pranks just at the moment when Miss Hollister and I were about to adjourn to the billiard-room, so a tête-à-tête between you and Cecilia was impossible."

"She told you to see me?"

"She certainly did. I confess that my message does n't seem luminous, but I have a feeling that she meant to be kind. It may be that she is giving you time to disentangle yourself from the delectable Hezekiah's meshes. I can't elucidate; I merely convey information. But answer honestly if you can: has Cecilia ever by word or act refused you?"

"No," he replied grimly; "she 's never given me the chance!"

He asked me to luncheon, and on the way back to the inn, after inquiring my plans for returning to town, he proposed that I delay my departure until the following day. What he wanted, and he put it bluntly, was a friend at court, and as I had seemingly satisfied him of my entire good faith and of my devotion to his interests, he begged that I prolong my stay in Miss Hollister's house, giving as my excuse the condition of the chimneys of Hopefield Manor. He brushed aside my plea of other engagements and appealed to our old friendship. He was taking his troubles hard, and I felt that he really needed counsel and support in the involved state of his affairs. I did not see how my continued presence under Miss Hollister's roof could materially assist him, and the thought of remain-

ing there when there was no work to be done was repugnant to my sense of professional honor; but he was so persistent that I finally yielded.

While we ate luncheon I sought by every means to divert his thoughts to other channels. After we were seated in the dining-room four other men followed, exercising considerable care in placing themselves as far from one another as possible. A few moments later a motor hummed into the driveway, and we heard its owner ordering his chauffeur to return to town and hold himself subject to telephone call. This latest arrival appeared shortly in the dining-room, and surveying the rest of us with a disdainful air, sought a table in the remotest corner of the room. Others appeared, until eight in all had entered. The presence of these men at this hour, their air of aloofness, and the care they exercised in isolating themselves, interested me. They appeared to be gentlemen; they were, indeed, suggestive of the ampler metropolitan world; and one of them was unmistakably a foreigner.

While Wiggins appeared to ignore them, I was conscious that he reviewed the successive arrivals with every manifestation of contempt. One of these glum gentlemen seemed familiar; I could not at once recall him, but something

in his manner teased my memory for a moment before I placed him. Then it dawned upon me that he was the third man I had met in the field overhanging the garden after my eavesdropping experience the day before. I thought it as well, however, not to mention this fact, or to speak of the man I had seen so grimly posted in the midst of the cornfield. I was an observer, a looker-on, at Hopefield, and my immediate business was the collecting of information.

"Will you kindly tell me, Wiggy, who these strange gentlemen are and just what has brought them here at this hour? They seem greatly preoccupied, and the last one, in particular, surveyed you with a murderous eye. If we could be translated to some such inn as this in the environs of Paris, I should conclude that a duel was imminent and that these gentlemen were assembling to meet after their coffee to-morrow morning for an affair of honor."

"I know them; they are guests of the inn. Most of them were more or less companions in our procession across Europe last summer. The one in the tan suit is Henderson; you must have heard of him. The short dark chap of atrabilous countenance is John Stewart Dick, who pretends to be a philosopher. As for the others" —

He dismissed them with a jerk of the head.

My wits struggled with his explanation. It is my way to wish to reduce information to plain terms.

"Are these gentlemen, then, your rivals for the hand of Miss Cecilia Hollister? If so, they are a solemn band of suitors, I must confess."

"You have hit it, Ames. They are suitors, assembled from all parts of the world."

"Nice-looking fellows, except the chap with the monocle, who has just ordered rather more liquor than a gentleman should drink at this hour."

"That is Lord Arrowood. I have feared at times that Miss Octavia favored him."

"Possibly, but not likely. But how long is this thing going to last? If you fellows are going to hang on here until Miss Cecilia Hollister has chosen one of you for her husband, I shudder for your nerves. I imagine that any one of these gentlemen is likely to begin shooting across his plate at any minute. Such a situation would become intolerable very quickly if I were in the game and forced to lodge here."

"I hope," replied Wiggins with heat, "that you don't imagine these fellows can crowd me out! I've paid for a month's lodging in advance, and if you will stand by me I'm going to win."

"Spoken like a man, my dear Wiggins! You

may count on me to the sweet or bitter end, even if I pull down all the superb chimneys with which Pepperton adorned that house up yonder."

He silently clasped my hand. A little later I telephoned from the inn to my office explaining my absence and instructing my assistant to visit several pressing clients; and I instructed the valet at the Hare and Tortoise to send me a week's supply of linen and an odd suit or two.

At about three o'clock I left Wiggins in first-rate spirits and set out on my return to Hopefield Manor. I felt the eyes of the eight other suitors, who were scattered at intervals along the verandah, glued to my back as I drove out of the inn yard.

VII

NINE SILK HATS CROSS A STILE

A GIRL in a white sweater sat on a stone wall and munched a red apple; but this is to anticipate.

I had made a wrong turn on leaving the Prescott Arms, and I came out presently near Katonah village. I got my bearings of a shopkeeper and started again for Hopefield Manor; but the mid-afternoon was warm, and the hills were steep, and as Miss Hollister's admirable cob showed signs of weariness, I drove into a fence-corner and loosened the mare's check. On a sunny slope several hundred yards above the highway lay an orchard, advertised to the larcenous eye by the ruddiest of red apples. Not in many years had I robbed an orchard, and I felt irresistibly drawn toward the gnarled trees, which were still, in their old age, abundantly fruitful.

When I reached the orchard I found it quite isolated, with only fallow fields, seamed with stone fences, stretching on either hand. A spring near by sent the slenderest of brooks flashing down the slope. There was no house in sight

anywhere, and the neglected orchard flaunted its bright fruit with pathetic bravado. I drew down a bough and plucked my first apple, tasted, and found it good. At my palate's first responsive titillation, something whizzed past my ear, and following the flight of the missile, I saw an apple of goodly size fall and roll away into the grass. I had imagined myself utterly alone, and even now, as I looked guiltily around, no one was in sight. The apple had passed my ear swiftly and at an angle quite un-Newtonian. It had been fairly aimed at my head, and the law of gravitation did not account for it. As I continued my scrutiny of the landscape, I was addressed by a voice whose accents were not objurgatory. Rather, the tone was good-natured and indulgent, if not indeed a trifle patronizing. The words were these: —

"Soup of the evening, beautiful soup!"

It was then that, lifting my eyes, I beheld, sitting lengthwise of the wall, with her feet drawn comfortably under her, a girl in a white sweater, bareheaded, munching an apple. There was no question of identity: it was the girl whose head behind the cashier's grill of the Asolando had interested me on the occasion of my second visit to the tea-room. In soliciting my attention by

reciting a line of verse, she had merely followed the rule of the tea-room in like circumstances. The casting of the apple at my head possessed the virtue of novelty, but now that her shot was fired and her line spoken, she addressed herself again to her apple. Her manner implied indifference; but her unconcern was that of a trout not wishing to discourage the fisherman, feigning a languid interest in a familiar fly dropped at its nose. While I tried to think of something to say, I pecked at my own apple, but kept an eye on her. She concluded her repast calmly and flung away the core.

"I mentioned soup," she remarked. "The courses are mixed. We have partaken of fruit. Are you fish, flesh, fowl, or good red herring?"

"Daughter of Eve, I will be anything you like. I 'm obliged for the apple, and I apologize for having entered Eden uninvited."

"It 's not my Eden. Nobody invited me. But it 's not too much to say that these apples are grand."

"I 'm glad we 're both in the same boat. I 'm a trespasser myself. I don't even know the name of the owner. But if you have had only one apple, two more are coming to you, if you follow Atalanta's precedent."

"I don't follow precedents, and I 've forgot-

ten the name of the boy who threw the apples in the race. It does n't matter, though; nothing matters very much."

Her hands clasped her knees. Her skirt was short, and I was conscious that she wore tan shoes. She continued to regard me with lazy curiosity. She seemed younger than at the Asolando. Not more than eighteen times had apples reddened on the bough in her lifetime! She was even slenderer and more youthful in her sweater than in the snowy vestments of the Asolando. Her hair which, in the glow of the lamp at Asolando cash-desk had been golden, was to-day burnished copper, and was brushed straight back from her forehead and tied with a black ribbon.

"I quite agree with your philosophy. Nothing is of great importance."

"So it 's not your orchard?" she asked.

"The thought flatters me. I own no lands nor ships at sea. I 'm a chimney doctor, and if necessary I 'll apologize for it."

"You need n't submit testimonials; I take the swallows out of my own chimneys."

"That requires a deft hand, and I 'm sure you 're considerate of the swallows."

"You may come up here and sit on the wall if you care to. I saw you driving in a trap. I

hope your horse is n't afraid of motors; motors speed scandalously on that road."

"I am not in the least worried about my horse. It 's borrowed. As you remarked, this is a nice orchard. I like it here."

"If you are going to be silly, you will find me little inclined to nonsense."

"Shall we talk of the Asolando? I have n't been back since I saw you there. And yet, — let me see, is n't this your day there?"

She seemed greatly amused; and her laughter rose with a fountain-like spontaneity, and fell, a splash of musical sound, on the mellow air of the orchard. She had changed her position as I joined her, sitting erect, and kicking her heels lazily against the wall.

"Mr. Chimney Man, something terrible happened just after you left that afternoon. I was bounced, fired; I lost my job."

"Incredible! I 'm sure it was not for any good cause. I can testify that you were a model of attention; you were surpassingly discreet. You repelled me in the most delicate manner when I intimated that I should come often on the days that you made the change."

"The sad part of it was that that was not only my last day but my first! I had never been there before, except for a nibble now and then

when I was in town. But I could n't stand it. It was like being in jail; in fact, I think jail would be preferable. But I 'm glad I spent that one day there. It proved what I have long believed, that I am a barbarian. That poetry on the walls of the Asolando made me tired, not that it is n't good poetry, but that the walls of a tea-shop are no place for it. I always suspect that people who like their poetry framed, and who have uplift mottoes stuck in mirrors where they can study them while they brush their hair in the morning, never really get any poetry inside of them. You need a place like this for poetry, — an old orchard, with blue sky and a crumbly wall to sit on. I tried the Asolando as a lark, really, not because I 'm deeply entertained by that sort of thing. They dispensed with my company because I remarked to one of the silly girls who are making the Asolando their life-work that I thought the English Pre-Raphaelites had carried the dish-face rather too far. The girl to whom I uttered this heresy was so shocked she dropped a tea-cup, — you know how brittle everything is in there, — and I came home. You were really the only adventure I got out of my day there. And I did n't find you entirely satisfactory."

"Thank you, Francesca, for these confidences.

And having lost your position you are now free to roam the hills and dream on orchard walls. Your scheme of life is to my liking. I can see with half an eye that you were born for the open, and that the walls of no prison-house can ever hold you again."

She nodded a dreamy acquiescence. Then she turned two very brown eyes full upon me and demanded: —

"What is your name, please?"

I mentioned it.

"And you doctor chimneys? That sounds very amusing."

"I 'm glad you like it. Most people think it absurd."

"What are you doing here? There 's not a chimney in sight."

"Oh, I have a commission in the neighborhood. Hopefield Manor; you may have heard of Miss Hollister's place."

"Of course; every one knows of her."

"And now that I think of it, it was she about whom you asked in the Asolando that afternoon. You wanted to know what she said about the tea-room."

"I remember perfectly."

She was quiet for a moment, then she threw back her head and laughed that rare laugh of hers.

"You might let me into the joke."

"It would n't mean anything to you. I have a lot of private jokes that are for my own consumption."

"Your way of laughing is adorable. I hope to hear more of it. In the Asolando you repulsed me in a manner that won my admiration, but I venture to say now that, if you roam these pastures, I am the grass beneath your feet; and if yonder tuneful water be sacred to you, I sit beside the brook to learn its song."

"You talk well, sir, but from your tone I fear you can't forget that we met first in the Asolando. That day of my life is past, and I am by no means what you might call an Asolandad. I don't seem to impress you with that fact. I 'm a human being, not to be picked like a red apple, or trampled upon like grass, or listened to as though I were a foolish little brook. I 'm greatly given to the highway, and I prefer macadam. I like asphalt pavements, too, for the matter of that. I should love a motor, but lacking the coin I pedal a bicycle. My wheel lies down there in the bushes. You see, Mr. Chimney Man, I am a plain-spoken person and have no intention of deceiving you. My name was Francesca for one day only. It may interest you to know that my real name is Hezekiah."

"Hezekiah!"

I must have shouted it; she seemed startled by my violence.

"You have pronounced it correctly," she remarked.

"Then you are Cecilia's sister and Miss Hollister's niece."

"Guilty."

"And you live? " —

"Over there somewhere, beyond that ridge," and she waved her hand vaguely toward the village and laughed again.

" Pray tell me what this particular joke is: it must be immensely funny," I urged, struggling with these new facts.

"Oh, it 's Aunt Octavia! She will be the death of me yet! You know the girl who waited on Aunt Octavia that afternoon took all that artistic nonsense as seriously as a funeral, and she told me after you left, with the greatest horror, that Aunt Octavia had asked for a cocktail!" That laugh rippled off again to carry joy along the planet-trails above us. "But you know," she resumed, "that Aunt Octavia never drank a cocktail in her life, — and would n't! She does n't know a cocktail from soothing syrup! She pines for adventures. She is just like a boarding-school girl who has read her first

romance of the young American engineer in a South American republic, shooting the insurgents full of tortillas and marrying the president's dark-eyed daughter. She reads pirate books and is crazy about buried chests and pieces of eight. And they say I 'm just like her! She is the most perfectly killing person in the world!"

Hezekiah laughed again.

So this was the child whose devotion had rendered Wiggins so miserable, and the sister of whom Cecilia Hollister and her aunt had spoken so strangely. I had not suspected it. She was as unlike Cecilia as possible, and the difference lay in her independent spirit and bubbling humor. Her individuality was more pronounced. You took her, without debate, on her own ground; and though she had expressed a preference for macadam, she seemed related to the days when maidens sat on sunny walls and were not disappointed in their expectation that light-footed youths, or mayhap winged sons of the Olympians, would reward patient waiting. But at the same time she struck the note of modernity. Her flings at the Asolando were reassuring; she was a healthy-minded, vigorous young woman whose nature protested against affectation and pose. She rebelled against closed doors, whether

those of town or country. I am myself much of a cockney, and not averse to asphalt and streets ablaze with electric banners. My imagination sprang to meet this Hezekiah. I had, in fact, a feeling that I had waited for her somewhere in some earlier incarnation. She jumped down from the wall, shook three apples from a tree, and sustained them in the air with the deftness and certainty of practised *jonglerie*. Her absorption was complete, and when she wearied of this sport, she flung the apples away, one after the other, with a boy's free swing of the arm. Herrick would have delighted in her; Dobson would have spun her bright hair into a rondeau; but only Aldrich, with a twinkle in his eye, could have brought her up to date in a dozen chiming couplets. I felt that no matter how much one admired and respected this Hezekiah one would never deal with her in the phrases of drawing-rooms. Her charming inadvertences made this impossible; and it was the part of discretion to await her own initiative.

She had gone on up to the crest of the orchard, and stood clearly limned against the sky, her hands thrust into the pockets of her sweater. She appeared to be intent upon something that lay beyond, and half turned her head and summoned me by whistling. I liked this better than

the quotation method of address. It was a clear shrill pipe, that whistle, and she emphasized it further by a peremptory wave of her arm. When

I stood beside her I was surprised to find that the site commanded a wide area, including the unmistakable roofs and chimneys of Hopefield Manor half a mile distant.

"You will see something funny down there

in a minute. They are out of sight now, but there 's a stile — the kind with steps, just beyond those trees. It 's in a path that leads from the Prescott Arms to Aunt Octavia's. Look!"

My eyes discovered the stile. It was set in a wall that was, she told me, the boundary dividing Hopefield Manor from another estate nearer our position.

Suddenly a silk hat bobbed in the path beyond the stile; it rose as its owner mounted the steps; it paused an instant when the top of the stile was reached; then quickly descended, and came toward us, a black blot above a black coat. I was about to ask her the meaning of this apparition when a second silk hat bobbed in the path and then rose like its predecessor, descending and keeping on its way until hidden from our sight by shrubbery. A third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth followed. Nine gentlemen in silk hats crossing a stile in a lonely pasture between woodlands; so much was plain to the eye from our vantage-ground; but I groped blindly for an explanation of this spectacle. The bobbing hats and dark coats suggested wanderers from some dark Plutonian cave, bent upon mischief to the upper world. Their step was jaunty; they moved as though drilled to the same cadence.

We waited a moment, expecting that another figure might join the strange procession, but nine was the correct count. I looked down to find Hezekiah checking them off on the fingers of her slim brown hand.

"Has there been a funeral and are they the returning pall-bearers?" I inquired.

"Not yet," she replied.

Her face showed amusement; the twitching of her lips encouraged hope that another of those delightful laughs was imminent.

"It was positively weird," I said. "It reminds me of a dream I used to have, when I was a boy, of a long line of Chinamen running along the top of a great wall, — an interminable procession. I must have dreamed that dream a hundred times. I could hear the pigtails of those fellows flapping against their backs as they trotted along, and the soft scraping of their sandals on the smooth surface of the wall. But the pot hats are equally eerie and unaccountable to my dull twentieth-century senses. Pray tell me the answer, Hezekiah."

"Oh, those are Cecilia's suitors. They 've been to Aunt Octavia's to tea. They 're staying at the Prescott Arms probably."

"They 're terribly formal. I can't get rid of the impression of sombreness created by those

fellows. You 'd hardly expect them to tramp cross country in those duds. Such grandeur should go on wheels."

"Oh, they are afraid of Aunt Octavia! She won't allow a motor on her grounds; and I suppose they 're afraid they might break some other rule if they went on any kind of wheels. She 's rather exacting, you know, my aunt Octavia."

"I was at the Prescott for luncheon to-day, and I must have seen these gentlemen there."

"Oh, *you* were at the Prescott?"

Almost for the first time her manner betrayed surprise; but mischief danced in the brown eyes. With Wiggins's confession as to the havoc he had played with Hezekiah's confiding heart fresh in my memory, I felt a delicacy about telling her that it was to see Wiggins that I had visited the inn. But to my surprise she introduced the subject of Wiggins immediately, and with laughter struggling for one of those fountain-like splashes that were so beguiling.

"Oh, Wiggy is staying there! Do you know Wiggy?"

"Know Wiggy, Hezekiah? I know no man better."

"Wiggy is no end of fun, is n't he? I've heard him speak of you. You are his friend the Chim-

ney Man. He was the last man over the stile. Did you notice that he lingered a moment longer at the top than the others? From his being the ninth man I imagine that he was the last to leave the house, and he probably felt that this set him apart from the others. Wiggy is nothing if not shy and retiring."

A heart-broken, love-lorn girl did not speak here. She whistled softly to herself as we descended. The air was cooling rapidly, and the west was hung in scarlet and purple and gold. The horse neighed in the road below, and I knew that I must be on my way to the Manor.

"Hezekiah," I said, when I had drawn her bicycle from its hiding-place, "you 'd better leave your wheel here and let me drive you home. It 's late and there 's frost in the air. I imagine it 's some distance to your house."

"Thank you, Mr. Chimney Man; but it is much farther to Aunt Octavia's, for you have to make a long circuit around the hills. And besides, as we met in the orchard, it would be altogether too commonplace a conclusion of our adventure for you to drive me home behind a mere horse. But tell me this: what do you think of Wiggy's chances?"

"Of winning your sister? I should say from my knowledge of Wiggins that he is a man much

given to staying in a game once the cards are shuffled."

She nodded, standing beside her wheel, her hands on the bars. Her manner was contemplative; her eyes for a moment were deep, shadowless pools of reverie.

"Then you think he knows the game?"

There seemed to be something beneath the surface meaning of her words, but I answered: —

"Wiggy's affairs have been few, and while he may not know the game in all its intricacies, he has a shrewd if rather slow mind, and besides, he has asked my help in the matter."

"One of these speak-for-yourself-John situations, then? Well, I should say, Mr. Chimney Man, I should say" —

She made ready for flight, looking ahead to be sure of a clear thoroughfare.

"I should say," she concluded, settling her skirts, "that that indicates considerable intelligence on Wiggy's part."

The tires rolled smoothly away; the gravel crunching, the pebbles popping. The white sweater clasped a straight back snugly; then suddenly, as the wheels gained momentum, she bent low for a spurt, and her rapidly receding figure became a gray blur in the purple dusk.

VIII

CECILIA'S SILVER NOTE-BOOK

MISS OCTAVIA was in the gayest spirits at dinner that night, and struck afield at once with one of her amusing dicta.

"Human beings," she said, "may be divided into two groups, — interesting and uninteresting; but idiots abound in both classes."

Cecilia and I discussed this with more or less gravity, until we had exhausted the possibilities, Miss Octavia following with apparent interest and setting us off at a new tangent when our enthusiasm lagged. She referred in no way whatever to her chimneys, nor did she ask me how I had spent the day. I felt the pleading of Cecilia's eyes that I should accept the situation as it stood, and having already agreed to Wiggins's suggestion that I abide in Miss Hollister's house as a spy, — for this was the ignoble fact, — I felt the threads of conspiracy binding me fast. So far as my hostess was concerned, I was now less a guest than a member of the household.

The variety of subjects that Miss Octavia

suggested was amazing. From aeronautics to the negro question, from polar exploration to the political conditions in Bulgaria, she passed with the jauntiest insouciance and apparently with a considerable fund of information to support her positions. She knew many people in all walks of life. I remember that she spoke with the greatest freedom of the Governor of Indiana, whom she had met on a railway journey. She quoted this gentleman's utterances with keenest zest. His anecdotal range she declared to be the widest and raciest she had ever encountered in a considerable acquaintance with public characters. She thought the Hoosier statesman eminently fitted by reason of his acute sense of humor for the office of president.

"That man," said Miss Octavia, "was splendidly equipped for handling the most perplexing affairs of state. It seemed absurd that his public services should be limited to the petty business of a commonwealth whose chief products are pawpaws, persimmons, and politics. The governor told me that before his election he had been sorely beset by reformers. They had teased him persistently to express his views on the most absurd questions. They wanted him to promise all manner of things before they gave him their support. And finally, to appease

them, he answered that he would combine their questions in one and reply to all that, the earth being round, he would, if elected, do all in his power to make it square. This he found to be perfectly satisfactory to the reformers. Solomon was a mere tyro in wisdom compared with that man. You would n't expect so much sagacity in one who, by his own frank confession, had been raised on fried meat, and who declared that if grand opera were attempted in his state he would suspend the writ of habeas corpus and call out the militia to suppress it."

I was not at all sure whether the governor whom she quoted with so great delight was an actual person or a myth upon whom Miss Octavia hung her own whimsicalities; but as if to rebuke my skepticism, she dwelt on this personage at considerable length, inviting my own and Cecilia's questions as to her knowledge of him.

"I did n't suppose," remarked Cecilia provocatively, "that Indiana was really a place that you could go to on trains, but a kind of imaginary kingdom like Eppenwelzen-Sarkeld or Grünewald or Zenda, or an extinct place in Asia where lions crouch upon the ruins in the moonlight."

"Indiana," said Miss Octavia sternly, "is a commonwealth for which I have always had

the greatest veneration, and which, in due course, I hope to visit. In the early seventies my father, the late Hezekiah Hollister, invested a considerable part of his fortune in Indiana farm-mortgages. On these investments the interest was paid with only the greatest reluctance and in the most fitful fashion. This, I think, argues for a keen sense of humor in the Hoosier people. Interest is something that I should never think of paying in any circumstances, as I have always considered it immoral. My father, keenly enjoying the playfulness of the Hoosiers in this particular, saved himself from loss merely by raising the price of baby-cabs throughout the world, and gave the mortgages as a free gift to the Society for the Amelioration of the Condition of Good Indians. All the good Indians being dead, the society had no expenses except officers' salaries, and as the Hoosiers gave up politics for a season and raised enough corn to pay their debts, the society became enormously rich."

As we rose from the table Miss Octavia declared that she must show me the pie-pantry. I was now so accustomed to her ways that I should not have been in the least surprised if she had proposed opening a steel vault filled with a mummified Egyptian dynasty.

"The gentleman who built this house," she explained, "had already grown rich in the manufacture of the famous ribless umbrella before he acquired a second fortune from a nostrum warranted to cure dyspepsia. He was inordinately fond of pies, and in order that this form of pastry might never be absent from his home, he had a special pantry built to which he might adjourn at his pleasure without any fear of finding the cupboard bare."

She led the way through the butler's pantry and into a small cupboarded room adjoining the table-linen closet. At her command the butler threw open the doors, and disclosed lines of shelves so arranged as to accommodate, in the most compact and orderly form imaginable, several dozens of pies. These pastries, in the pans as they had come from the oven, peeped out invitingly. Miss Octavia explained their presence in her usual impressive manner.

"It was one of the conditions of the sale of this house to me by the original owner's executors that the pie-vault should be kept filled at all times, whether I am in residence here or not. He felt greatly indebted to pie for the success of the dyspepsia cure. It had widened and steadily increased the market for the cure, and pie was to him a consecrated and sacred food. It

was his habit to eat a pie every night before retiring, and on the nightmares thus inspired he had planned the strategy of all his campaigns against dyspepsia. The man had elements of greatness, and these shelves are a monument to his genius. In order to keep perfect my title to this property it is necessary for me to maintain a pastry-cook, and as I do not myself care greatly for pie — though contrary to common experience I have found it a splendid antephialtic — the total output is distributed among the people of the neighborhood every second day. The station agent at Bedford is a heavy consumer, and a retired physician at Mt. Kisco has a standing order for a dozen a week. My niece Hezekiah, of whom you have heard me speak, is partial to a particular type of pie and one only. It is the gooseberry that delights Hezekiah's palate, and under G in File 3, in the corner behind you, there is even now a gooseberry pie that I shall send to Hezekiah, who, for reasons I need not explain, does not now visit here."

"But the dyspepsia man — you speak of him as though he were dead."

"Your assumption is correct, Mr. Ames. The builder of Hopefield died only a few weeks after he had established himself in this house. Hav-

ing entered upon the enjoyment of his well-earned leisure, and made it unnecessary that he should ever go pieless to bed, he gave himself up for a fortnight to a mad indulgence in meringues, and died after great suffering, steadily refusing his own medicine to the end."

We still lingered in the pie-crypt after this diverting recital, while Miss Octavia entertained me with her views on pies.

"The soul-color of pies varies greatly, Mr. Ames. It has always seemed to me that apple-pie stands for the homelier virtues of our civilization; it is substantial, nutritious and filling. The custard and lemon varieties are feminine, and do not, perhaps for that reason, appeal to me. Cherry-pie at its best is the last and final expression of the pie genus, and where cooks have been careful in eliminating the seeds, and the juice has n't made sodden dough of the crust, a cherry-pie meets the soul's highest demands. Grape and raisin-pie are on my cook's *index expurgatorius;* I consider them neither palatable nor respectable. But rhubarb is the most odious pie of all, in my judgment. It suggests the pharmacopœia — only that and nothing more. You will pardon me for mentioning the matter, but one of my gardeners, a Swiss, crawled in here two nights ago and stole a rhubarb-pie,

which, I rejoice to say, made him hideously ill. The R's, you will notice, are placed near the floor and within easy reach of any larcenous hand. The ease of his approach was his undoing. The pumpkin variety reaches almost the same lofty heights as the cherry. When not over-dosed with spices, a pumpkin-pie conveys a sense of the October landscape that is the despair of the best painters. In the gooseberry I find a certain raciness, or if I may use the expression, zip, that is highly stimulating. Both qualities you will observe in Hezekiah if you come to know her well. The thought of blackberry or raspberry-pie depresses me, but huckleberry buoys the spirit again. The huckleberry seems to me to voice a protest, and unless managed with the greatest neatness and circumspection it is bound to stimulate the laundry business. As any one who would eat a cooked strawberry would steal a sick baby's rattle, I need hardly say that strawberry-pies, even in their season, shall have no place on these shelves."

"So it is the gooseberry that Miss Hezekiah prefers," I remarked with feigned carelessness, as we walked toward the library.

"It is, Mr. Ames; and I trust that your inquiry implies no reflection on Hezekiah's judgment."

"Quite the reverse, Miss Hollister. It is not going too far to say that I have formed a high opinion of Miss Hezekiah, and that I should deal harshly with any one who ventured to criticise her in any particular."

"Will you kindly inform me just when you made the acquaintance of my younger niece? I should greatly dislike to believe you guilty of dissimulation, but when Hezekiah was mentioned in the gun-room last night your silence led me to assume that she was wholly unknown to you."

"She was, I assure you, at the dinner-hour last night; but I met her quite by chance this afternoon, in an orchard at no great distance from this house."

I did not think it necessary to mention the Asolando, as Hezekiah herself had taken pains to avoid her aunt in the tea room. It was clear that my words had interested Miss Octavia. She paused in the hall, and bent her head in thought for a moment.

"May I inquire whether she referred in any way to Mr. Wiggins in this interview?"

"She did, Miss Hollister," I replied; and I could not help smiling as I remembered Hezekiah's laughter at the mention of my friend. My smile did not escape Miss Octavia.

"Just how, may I ask, did she refer to Mr. Wiggins?"

"As though she thought him the funniest of human beings. She laughed deliciously at the bare mention of his name."

"It was not your impression, then, that she was deeply enamored of him; that she was eating her heart out for him?"

"Decidedly not, Miss Hollister. She gave me quite a different idea."

"You relieve me greatly. Mr. Wiggins's sense of humor is the slightest, and I should not in the least fancy him for Hezekiah. And besides, I am not yet ready to arrange a marriage for her."

She laid the slightest stress on the final pronoun. It was a fair inference, then, that Miss Cecilia's affairs were being "arranged;" when they had been determined, a husband would be found for Hezekiah. But had there ever existed before, anywhere in the Copernican system, a wealthy aunt so delightfully irresponsible, so vortiginous in her mental processes, so happily combining the maddest quixotism with the bold spirit of the Elizabethan mariners! My faith in the real sweetness and kindliness of her nature was unshaken by her capriciousness. I did not doubt that her intentions toward her

nieces were the friendliest, no matter what strange devices she might employ to bend those young women to her purposes.

She disappeared in the hall without excuse, and I entered the library to find Cecilia sitting alone by the fire. She put aside a book she had been reading, and seeing that her aunt had not followed me, asked at once as to my visit to the inn.

"I conveyed your message," I answered; "but you have seen Mr. Wiggins since, unless I am greatly mistaken."

"Yes; he called this afternoon. We had several callers at the tea-hour. I had rather expected you back."

"The fact is," I replied, "that after I had taken luncheon at the Prescott Arms, I got lost among the hills, and while in the act of robbing an apple-orchard I came most unexpectedly upon your sister."

"Hezekiah!"

"The same; and oddly enough, I had met her before, though I did n't realize it was she until the meeting in the orchard. It was in the Asolando that I saw her; she was at the cashier's wicket the afternoon I met your aunt there."

She seemed puzzled for a moment; then her eyes brightened, and she laughed; but her

laugh was not like Hezekiah's. Cecilia's mirth had its own expression. It was touched with a sweet gravity, and her laughter was such as one would expect from the Milo if that divine marble were to yield to mirth. Cecilia grew upon me: there was magic in her loveliness; she was a finished product. It seemed inconceivable that she and the fair-haired girl with whom I had exchanged banter in the upland orchard were daughters of one mother.

"You have given me information, Mr. Ames. I did not know that Hezekiah had ever been connected with the Asolando."

"Oh, it was only that one historic day. She says the place was unbearable. She jarred the holiest chords of the divine lyre by harsh comments on the Pre-Raphaelite profile. One of the devotees was so shocked that she dropped a plate or something, and, to put it coarsely, Hezekiah got the bounce."

My description of Hezekiah's brief tenure of office at the Asolando seemed to amuse Cecilia greatly.

"There is no one like my sister," she said; "there never was and there never will be any one half so charming. Hezekiah is an original, who breaks all the rules and yet always sends the ball over the net. And it is because she is

so inexpressibly dear and precious that I am anxious that nothing shall ever hurt her, — nothing mar the sweet, beautiful child-spirit in her."

It was my turn to laugh now. Cecilia's manifestation of maternal solicitude for Hezekiah seemed absurd. For Hezekiah, in her way, was older; Hezekiah had raced with Diana and plucked arrows from her girdle; she had heard Homer at the roadside singing of Achilles' shield.

"Hezekiah is reasonably safe, I should say, because she is so amazingly swift of foot and eye, and so nimble of speech. She is not to be caught in a net or tripped with a word."

"I suppose that is so," remarked Cecilia soberly. "You thought her happy when you met her to-day? She did not strike you as being a girl with a wound in her heart? She was n't particularly *triste?*"

"Not more so than sunlight on rippled water or the song of the lark ascending."

"Of course you made no reference to Mr. Wiggins? If I had imagined you would meet her I should have" —

She ended with an embarrassment that I now understood, and I broke in cheerfully.

"We did mention him. She asked me if I

had seen him, and it was the thought of him that evoked her merriest laughter."

She shook her head and sighed; then her manner changed abruptly.

"You delivered my message to Mr. Wiggins?"

"I did. He is badly out of sorts and sees nothing clearly. He is very bitter toward your aunt. He thinks she has treated him outrageously."

"Aunt Octavia has done nothing of the kind," she replied with spirit. "Mr. Wiggins has no right to speak of Aunt Octavia save in terms of kindness. If her wits are sharper than his, it is not her fault, that I can see! But there are matters here that I do not understand, Mr. Ames. I trust you, as my aunt evidently does, or I should not be talking to you as I am; and I am moved to ask a favor of you, — a favor of considerable weight in view of the fact that you are a professional man with doubtless many pressing calls upon your time."

I bowed humbly before this compliment. My time had been lightly appraised by Miss Octavia and again by Wiggins. A long telegram from my assistant that reached me while I dressed for dinner had urged my immediate attendance upon my office. Some of my best clients, now reopening their houses for the winter, were in

desperate straits. From the number of appeals for help reported by my assistant I judged that all the chimneys in the republic had grown obstreperous. But Father Time learned early in his career that to women his scythe's edge has no terrors. In this instance I must admit that if Cecilia Hollister wished to cut a few days out of my reasonable expectation of life it was not for me to plead sick chimneys as an excuse for declining to serve her.

In fact, I had never found myself so close upon the heels of the adventure that we all crave as since making the acquaintance of the Hollisters. Octavia Hollisters do not occur in the life of every young man, and both Cecilia and Hezekiah had taken strong hold upon my imagination. Wiggins's place among the dramatis personæ would in itself have compelled my sympathetic attention; and the nine silk hats that I had seen bobbing over the stile still danced before my eyes.

"Miss Hollister," I said, "my time is yours to command. My office is well organized, and I am sure that my assistant is equal to any demands that may be made upon him. Pray state in what manner I may serve you."

"I am going far, I know, Mr. Ames, but I beg that you will not be in haste to leave my aunt's

house. She must have been strongly prejudiced in your favor, or she would not have asked you here on so short acquaintance. I am confident that she has no thought of your leaving. She expressed her great liking for you at luncheon, and I am sure that she will see to it that you do not lack for entertainment. I assume that you must have gathered from what Mr. Wiggins told you of my acquaintance with him the peculiar plight in which I am placed."

I bowed. If she groped in the dark and needed my help in finding the light, I was not the man to desert her. I had dropped my plumb-line into too many dark chimneys not to feel the fascination of mystery. As I expressed again my entire willingness to abide at Hopefield Manor as long as she wished, the footman announced Mr. Hartley Wiggins.

We had hardly exchanged greetings before another man was announced, and then another. I should say that it was at intervals of about three minutes that the sedate servant appeared in the curtained doorway and announced a caller, until nine had been admitted. My spirits soared high as the gentlemen from the Prescott Arms appeared one after the other. The earlier arrivals rose to greet the later ones, — and as they were all in evening clothes I expe-

rienced, as when I had seen the same gentlemen in their afternoon raiment crossing the stile, a sense of something fantastic and eerie in them. There was nothing unusual about them, taken as individuals; collectively they were like life-size studies in black and white that had stepped from their frames for an evening's recreation. Cecilia introduced me in the order of their arrival; and in the interest of brevity, and to avoid confusion, I tabulate them here, with a notation as to their residence and occupation, taking such data from the notebook in which, at subsequent dates, I set down the facts which are the basis of this chronicle.

Hartley Wiggins, Lawyer and Farmer; Hare and Tortoise Club, New York.

Linnæus B. Henderson, Planter; Roanoke, Virginia.

Cecil Hugh, Lord Arrowood, no occupation; Arrowood, Hants, England.

Daniel P. Ormsby, Manufacturer of Knit Goods; Utica, New York.

S. Forrest Hume, Lecturer on Scandinavian Literature, Occidental University; Long Trail, Oklahoma.

John Stewart Dick, Pragmatist; Omaha, Nebraska.

Pendennis J. Arbuthnot, Banker and Horseman; Lexington, Kentucky.

Percival B. Shallenberger, Novelist and Small Fruits; Sycamore, Indiana.

George W. Gorse, Capitalist; Redlands, California.

We rose and stood in our several places when, a moment later, Miss Octavia entered. She greeted the suitors graciously, and then, in her most charming manner, called one after the other to sit beside her on a long davenport, the time apportioned being weighed with nicety, so that none might feel himself slighted or preferred. These interviews consumed more than half an hour, and the movement thus occasioned gave considerable animation to the scene.

It may seem ridiculous that nine gentlemen thus paying court to a young woman should call upon her at the same hour, but I must say that the gravity of the suitors and the entire sobriety of Cecilia did not affect me humorously. Nor did I feel at all out of place in this strange company. I found myself agreeably engaged for several minutes in discussing Ibsen with the Oklahoma professor, who proved to be a delightful fellow. His experience of life was apparently wide, and he told me with an engaging

frankness of his meeting with the Hollisters in France and of his pursuit of them over many weary parasangs the previous summer. As no one had elected his courses in the university at the beginning of the fall term, he had been granted a leave of absence, and this accounted for his freedom to press his suit at Hopefield Manor at this season. He was a big fellow, with clean-cut features, and bore himself with a manly determination that I found attractive.

He alone, I may say, of the nine men who had thus appeared in Miss Octavia's library, met me in a cordial spirit. Even Wiggins seemed not wholly pleased to find me there again, though he had asked me to remain. The manner of the others expressed either disdain, suspicion, or fierce hostility, and Lord Arrowood, who was older than the others and a man well advanced toward middle age, glared at me so savagely with his pale blue eyes, that I should have laughed in his face in any other circumstances.

When the last man rose from the davenport, Miss Octavia called me to her side. She seemed contrite at having neglected me during the day, but assured me that later she hoped to place an entire day at my disposal. As we talked, the nine suitors sat in a semicircle about Cecilia,

while the group listened to an anecdotal exchange between Professor Hume and Henderson, the Virginia planter. My opinion of Cecilia Hollister as a girl of high spirit, able to carry off any situation no matter how difficult, rose to new altitudes as I watched her. If this strange wooing *en bloc* was not to her liking, she certainly made the best of it. She capped Henderson's best story with a better one, in negro dialect, and no professional entertainer could have improved upon her recital. As she finished we all joined in the general laugh, Lord Arrowood's guffaw booming out a trifle boisterously, when Miss Octavia quietly rose and excused herself. About five minutes later, when the company had plunged into another series of anecdotes, I suddenly became conscious that the fireplace, near which I sat, had all at once begun to act strangely. Much in the manner of its performance the previous night, it abruptly gasped and choked; the smoke ballooned in a great swirl and then poured out into the room.

After my examination of the flues in the morning, I had dismissed them from my mind, and this extraordinary behavior of the library fireplace astounded me. It is not in reason that a perfectly normal fireplace, built in the most approved fashion, and with chimneys that rise

into as clear an ether as October can bestow, could act so monstrously without the intervention of some malign agency. We had discussed all the possibilities the previous night, and I was not anxious to hear further lay opinions. The chimney's conduct was annoying, the more so that to my professional sense it was inexplicable.

Lord Arrowood had retreated discreetly toward the door, and the others had risen and stood close behind Cecilia, whose gaze was bent rather accusingly upon me.

A dark thought had crossed my mind. As our eyes met, I felt that she had read my suspicions and did not wholly reject them. Henderson was valiantly poking the logs, while one or two of the other men gave him the benefit of their advice. I crossed the hall to the drawing-room, but no one was there. I went back to the billiard-room, but saw nothing of Miss Octavia. Cecilia had rung for the footman, and I passed him in the hall on his way to answer her summons. I stopped him with an inquiry on my lips; but I could not ask the question; even in my perplexity as to the cause of the chimney's remarkable performances I did not so far forget myself as to communicate my suspicion to a servant.

"Nothing, Thomas," I said; and the man passed on.

It was possible, of course, that Miss Octavia knew more than she cared to tell about the erratic ways of the library chimney, or she might indeed be the cause of its vagaries. Sufficient time had elapsed after her retirement from the library to allow her to gain the roof and clap a stopper on the chimney-pot. This did not however account for the fact that on the previous evening she had been present in the library when the same chimney had manifested a similar sulkiness. I was still pondering these things when I heard loud laughter from the library, and on returning found the logs again blazing in the fireplace, from which the smoke rose demurely in the flue.

"This fireplace is like a geyser, Mr. Ames," said Cecilia, "and spurts smoke at regular intervals. As I remember, the clock on the stair was striking nine last night when the smoke poured out, and there — it is striking nine now!"

She tossed her head slightly; and this was, I thought, in disdain of the suspicion that must still have shown itself a little stubbornly in my face.

I withdrew again in a few minutes, and followed the great chimney's course upward. Miss Octa-

via's apartments were at the front of the house, her sitting-room windows looking out upon the Italian garden. Her doors were closed, but I knew from my examination in the morning that the flue of her fireplace tapped the chimney that rose from the drawing-room, and had nothing whatever to do with the library chimney.

From the fourth floor I gained the roof, by the route followed on my inspection of the house in the morning. The smoke from the library chimney was rising in the crisp, still air blithely. I leaned upon the crenelations and looked off across the hills, enjoying the loveliness of the sky, in which the planets throbbed superbly. There was nothing to be learned here, and I crept back to the trap-door through which I had come, made it fast, and continued on down to the library.

There, somewhat to my surprise, I found that in my absence all but Hume had taken their departure. As I paused unseen in the doorway, I caught words that were clearly not intended for my ear.

Cecilia sat by the long table near the fireplace; Hume stood before her, his arms folded.

"You are kind; you do me great honor, Professor Hume, but under no circumstances can I become your wife."

I retreated hastily to the billiard-room, where I took a cue from the rack and amused myself for perhaps fifteen minutes, when, hearing the outer door close and knowing that Hume had departed with his congee, I returned to the library.

Cecilia sat where I had left her, and at first glance I thought she was reading; but she turned quickly as I crossed the room. She held in her hand an oblong silver trinket not larger than a card-case. A short pencil similar to those affixed to dance-cards was attached to it by a slight cord, and she had, I inferred, been making a notation of some kind on a leaf of the silver-bound booklet. Even after she had looked up and smiled at me, her eyes sought the page before her; then she closed the covers and clasped the pretty toy in her hand. As though to divert my attention she recurred at once to the chimney, in a vein of light irony.

"You see," she said, "there is ample reason for your remaining here. You would hardly find anywhere else so interesting a test of your professional powers as Hopefield Manor offers. The house is haunted beyond question, and I can see that you are not a man to leave two defenseless women to the mercy of a ghost who drops down chimneys at will."

I suffered her chaff for several minutes, then I asked point-blank:—

"Pardon me, but have you the slightest idea that Miss Octavia is behind this? It is not possible that she was responsible last night; but she was not on this floor a while ago when the smoke poured in here. I should be glad to hear your opinion."

"I saw that you suspected her before you left the room, Mr. Ames, and I must say that the idea is in no way creditable to you. If you entertain such a suspicion you must supply a motive, and just what motive would you attribute to my Aunt Octavia in this instance?"

Her tone and manner piqued me, or I should not have answered as I did.

"It is possible," I said, "that some of these gentlemen who came here to-night were not to her liking, and it may have occurred to her to get rid of them by the obviously successful method of smoking them out."

She rose, still clasping the little silver-backed note-book, and looked me over with amusement in her face and eyes.

"You are almost too ingenious, Mr. Ames. I hope that by breakfast-time you will have some more plausible solution of the problem. Good-night."

And so, tightly clasping the little book, she left the room. I followed her to the door, and at the turn of the stair she glanced down and nodded. Her face, as it hung above me for an instant, seemed transfigured with happiness.

But, as will appear, my adventures for the day were not concluded.

IX

I MEET A PLAYFUL GHOST

It was not yet ten o'clock, and I was dismayed at the thought of being left to my own devices in this big country-house, at an hour when the talk at the Hare and Tortoise usually became worth while. I sat down and began to turn over the periodicals on the library table, but I was in no mood for reading.

The butler appeared and offered me drink, but the thought of drinking alone did not appeal to me. I repelled the suggestion coldly; but after I had dropped my eyes to the English review I had taken up, I was conscious that he stood his ground.

"Beg pardon, sir."

"Well?"

"Hit 's a bit hod about the chimney, sir."

The professional man in me was at once alert. The chimney's conduct was inexplicable enough, but I was in no humor to brook the theories of a stupid servant. Still, he might know something, so I nodded for him to go on.

He glanced over his shoulder and came a step nearer.

"They say in the village, sir, that the 'ouse is 'aunted."

"What?"

"'Aunted, sir."

"Who say it, James?"

"The liveryman told the coachman, and the 'ousemaid got hit from a seamstress. Hit 's werry queer, sir."

"Rubbish, James. I 'm amazed that a person of your station should listen to a liveryman's gossip. There 's the chimney, it 's working perfectly. Some shift of air-currents causes it to puff a little smoke into this room occasionally, but those things are not related to the supernatural. We 'll find some way of correcting it in a day or two."

"Werry good, sir. But begging pardon, the chimney hain't hall. Hit walks, if I may so hexpress hit."

"Walks?" I exclaimed, sitting up and throwing down my review. "What walks?"

"You 'ear hit, sir, hin the walls. Hit goes right through the solid brick, most hunaccountable."

"You hear a mouse in the walls and think it 's a ghost? But you forget, James, that this is a new house, — only a year or so old, — and spooks don't frequent such places. If it were an old place, it might be possible that the creak-

ing of floors and the settling of walls would cause uneasiness in nervous people. The ghost tradition usually rests on some ugly fact. But here nothing of the kind is present."

"Hit was one of 'is majesty's horfficers, sir," he answered hoarsely.

It flashed over me that this big stolid fellow was out of his head; but sane or mad he was

clearly greatly disturbed. It was best, I thought, on either hypothesis, to speak to him peremptorily, and I rose, the better to deal with the situation.

"What nonsense is this you have in your head? You 're in the United States, and there are n't any majesty's soldiers to deal with. You forget that you 're not in England now."

"But this 'ere country used to be Henglish, you may recall, sir. The story the coachman got hin the village goes back to the hold times, sir, when the colonies was hin rebellion, if I may so call hit, sir, and 'is majesty's troops was puttin' down the rebellion hin these parts. Some American rebels chased a British soldier from hover near White Plains to these 'ere woods as they was then, and they 'anged 'im, sir, right where this 'ere 'ouse stands, if I may make so free."

"Ah! This is a revolutionary relic, then?"

"You 'ave got hit, sir," he sputtered eagerly. "They 'anged the man right 'ere where the 'ouse stands."

"That 's not a bad story, James. And what does your mistress say about it?"

"Well, sir; hit 's the talk hin the village that that 's why she bought the place, sir. She rather fancies ghosts and the like, as you may know, sir."

"Be careful what you say, James. Miss Hollister is a noble and wise lady, and you do well to give her your best service."

"We 're all fond of 'er, sir, though she 's a bit troubled hin the 'ead, if I may make so bold. She says a good ghost is a hasset."

I did not at once catch 'asset' with an aspirate, but when he repeated it, I laughed in spite of myself.

"You 'd better go to bed, James. And don't encourage talk among the other servants about this ghost. I know something about the building of houses, and I 'll give these walls a good looking over. Good-night."

It was apparent that my interview had not cheered him greatly. He turned at the door, to ask if I would put out the lights, and fear was so clearly written upon his big red face that I dismissed him sharply.

I made myself comfortable for an hour, smoking a cigar over an article on English politics, and while I read, a big log placidly burned itself to ashes. I found the switch and snapped out the library lights. When I had gained the second floor I turned off the lights in the hall below, and as I looked down the well to make sure I had turned the right key, the third floor lights suddenly died and I was left in darkness. This

was the least bit disconcerting. I was quite sure that the upper lights had remained burning brightly after the darkening of the lower hall, so that it was hardly possible that the one switch had cut off both lights.

Standing by the rail that guarded the well, I peered upward, thinking that some one above me was manipulating another switch; but the silence was as complete as the blackness. I was about to turn from the rail to the wall to find the switch, but at this moment, as my face was still lifted in the intentness with which I was listening, something brushed my cheek, — something soft of touch and swift of movement. As I gripped the rail I felt this touch once, twice, thrice. Then my hand sought the wall madly, and with so bad an aim that it was quite a minute before I found the switch-plate and snapped all the keys. The stair, and the halls above and below me sprang into being again, and I stood blinking stupidly upward.

Though I was in a modern house thoroughly lighted by electricity, I cannot deny that this incident, following so quickly upon the butler's story, occasioned a moment's acute horripilation, accompanied by an uncomfortable tremor of the legs. As already hinted, I lay no claim to great valor. As for ghosts, I am half per-

suaded of their existence, and after witnessing a presentation of Hamlet, always feel that Shakespeare is as safe a guide in such matters as the destructive scientific critics.

There were various plausible explanations of the failure of the lights. Some switch that I did not know of, perhaps in the third-floor hall, might have been turned; or the power house in the village might have been shifting dynamos. Either solution of the riddle was credible. But the ghostly touch on my face could not be accounted for so readily. Leaving the lights on, I continued to the third floor, and examined the switch, and sought in other ways to explain these phenomena. My composure returned more slowly than I care to confess, and I think it was probably in my mind that the ghost of King George's dead soldier might be lying in wait for me; but I saw and heard nothing. The doors of the unused chambers on the third floor were closed, and I did not feel justified in trying them. The servants were housed on this floor, at the rear of the house, and a door that cut off their quarters proved on examination to be tightly locked.

The fourth floor was only a half-story, used for storage purposes. The roof was gained, I recalled, by an iron ladder and a hatchway in

a trunk-room. I ran down to my room and found a candle, to be armed against any further fickleness of the lights, and set out for the fourth floor. I had changed my coat, and with a couple of candles and a box of matches started for the roof. My courage had risen now, and I was ready for any further adventure that the night might hold for me. Miss Hollister and Cecilia were both in their rooms, presumably asleep; the servants doubtless had their doors barred against ghostly visitors, and the house was mine to explore as I pleased.

I think I was humming slightly as I mounted the stair, which, in keeping with the general luxuriousness that characterized the furnishing of the house, was thickly carpeted even to the fourth floor. I was slipping my hand along the rail, and mounting, I dare say, a little jauntily as I screwed my courage to an unfamiliar notch, when suddenly, midway of the first half, and just before I reached the turn where the stair broke, the lights failed again, with startling abruptness. This was carrying the joke pretty far, and instantly I clapped my hand to my pocket for the box of safety-matches, dug it out, and then in my haste dropped the lid essential to ignition, and stooped to find it.

The stair had narrowed on this flight, and as

I sought with futile eagerness to regain the box-lid, I could have sworn that some one passed me. Still half-stooping, I stretched out my arms and clasped empty air, and so suddenly had I thrown myself forward, that I lost my balance and rolled downward the space of half a dozen treads before I recovered myself. I was badly scared and hardly less angry at having missed through my own clumsiness the joy of grappling with the ghost of one of King George's soldiers; but the matches having been lost in the pitch-darkness of the stair, I could get my bearings again only by clinging to the stair-rail until I found the second-floor switch. I should say that two full minutes had passed between the loss of the matches and my flashing on of the lamps. From top to bottom the lights shone brightly; but no one was visible and I heard no sound in any part of the house.

As I began to analyze my sensations during the temporary eclipse of the lights, I was conscious of two things. The being, human or other, that had passed me had been light of step and fleet of motion. There had been something uncanny in the ease and speed of that passing. I was without conviction as to its direction, whether up or down, though I inclined to the former notion for the reason that the em-

ployment of a concealed switch above seemed the more reasonable argument. And a faint, an almost imperceptible scent, as of a flower, had seemed to be a part of the passing. Mine is a sensitive nostril, and I was confident that it did not betray me in this. The sensation stirred by that faintest of odors had been agreeable; there was nothing suggestive of grave-mold or cerecloth about it. There was in fact something rather delightfully human and contemporaneous in this fellow that pleased and reassured me. That scamp of a revolutionary British soldier, resenting as was his right the application of hemp to his precious neck, had still a grace in him, and a ghost who prowls undaunted about an electric-lighted house in this twentieth century, having his whim with the switches, cannot be an utterly bad fellow. My respect for all who are doomed to walk the night rose as, leaving the lights on clear to the lower hall, I gathered up my matches and started again for the roof. The trunk-room door opened readily, as on my morning inspection of the chimney-pots, but as I glanced up, I saw that the hatch was open. Through the aperture shone the heavens, a square of stars, and bright with the moon's radiance. Pocketing my matches, I ran nimbly up the ladder.

X

MY BEFUDDLEMENT INCREASES

I HAD been surprised to find the hatch open, but it is not too much to say that I was greatly astonished by what I saw on the moon-flooded roof. There, midway of a flat area that lay between the two larger chimney-pots, two persons were intently engaged, not in ghostly promenading or posturing, or even in audible conversation, but in a spirited bout with foils! The clicking and scraping of the steel testified unmistakably to the reality of their presence. And I was grateful for those sounds! It needed only silence to tumble me back down the trap with chattering teeth, but these were beyond question corporeal beings, albeit rendered weird and fantastical by the oddity of their playground and the soft effulgence of the moon. The vigor of the onset and the skill of the antagonists held me spellbound. I stood with head and shoulders thrust through the opening, staring at this unusual spectacle, and not sure but that after all my eyes were tricking me.

"*Touché!*"

It was a woman's voice, faint from breathlessness. She threw off her mask and dropped her foil, and with a most human and feminine gesture put up her hands to adjust her hair. It was Cecilia Hollister, in a short skirt and fencing coat!

Her opponent was a man, and as he too flung off his mask I saw that he was a gentleman of years. If Miss Cecilia Hollister chose to meet strange men on the roof of her aunt's house and practice the fencer's art with them, it was no affair of mine, and I was about to withdraw when the stranger swung round and saw me. His sudden exclamation caused the girl to turn, and as a reasonable frankness has always seemed to me essential to a nice discretion, I crawled out on the roof.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Hollister, but if I had known you were here I should not have intruded. The vagaries of the library chimney have been on my mind, and I was about to have another peep into yonder pot."

She stood at her ease, with one hand resting lightly against the inexplicable chimney in question, and still somewhat spent from her exercise.

"Father," she said, turning to the stranger who stood near, "this is Mr. Ames, who is Aunt Octavia's guest."

The light of the gibbous moon enabled me to discern pretty clearly the form and features of

Mr. Bassford Hollister. And I find, in looking over my notes, that I accepted as a matter of course the singular meeting with my hostess's brother. I had grown so used to the ways of the Hollisters I already knew, that the meeting with

another member of the family at eleven o'clock at night on the roof of this remarkable house gave me no great shock of surprise. He was tall, slender and dark, with fine eyes that suggested Cecilia's. His close-trimmed beard was slightly gray: but he bore himself erect, and I had already seen that he was alert of arm and eye and nimble of foot.

He put on his coat, which had been lying across one of the crenelations, and covered his head with a small soft hat.

"This will do for to-night, Cecilia. You had the best of me. We 'll try again another time. I 'm glad you stopped us, Mr. Ames. We 'd had enough."

He seemed in no wise disturbed by my appearance, nor in any haste to leave. This meeting between the father and daughter, I reasoned, could hardly have been a matter of chance, and it must have been in Cecilia's mind that some sort of explanation would not be amiss.

"Father and I have fenced together for years," she said. "My sister Hezekiah does not care for the sport. As you have already seen that my aunt Octavia is an unusual woman, given to many whims, I will not deny to you that at present my father is *persona non grata* in this house. I beg to assure you that nothing to his

discredit or mine has contributed to that situation, nor can our meeting here to-night be construed as detrimental to him or to me. In meeting my father in this way I have in a sense broken faith with my aunt Octavia, but I assure you, Mr. Ames, that it is only the natural affection for a daughter that led my father to seek me here in this clandestine fashion."

Cecilia had spoken steadily, but her voice broke as she concluded, and she walked quickly toward the hatchway. Her father stepped before me to give her his hand through the opening.

I withdrew to the edge of the roof while a few words passed between them that seemed to be on his part an expostulation and on hers an earnest denial and plea. He passed her the foils and masks and she vanished; whereupon he addressed himself to me.

"I had learned from both my daughters of your presence in my sister's house, and I had expected to meet you, sooner or later. This is a strange business, a strange business."

He had drawn out a pipe, which he filled and lighted dexterously. The flame of his match gave me better acquaintance with his face. He leaned against the serrated roof-guard with the greatest composure, his hat tilted to one

side, and drew his pipe to a glow. I had not forgotten my encounter with the ghost on the stair, and as I waited for him to speak, I was trying to identify him with the mysterious agency that had tampered with the lights, and passed so ghostly a hand across my face in the stair-well. I could hardly say that there had not been time for either Bassford Hollister or his daughter to have reached the roof after my experiences on the stair; and yet they had been engaged so earnestly at the moment of my appearance at the hatchway that it was improbable that either could have played ghost and flown to the roof before I reached it. And eliminating the ghost altogether, I had yet to learn how Bassford Hollister had gained entrance to the house. It seemed best to drop speculations and wait for him to declare himself.

"You must understand, Mr. Ames, that my daughters, both of them, are very dear to me. It is the great grief of my life that owing to matters beyond my control I have been unable to care for them as I should like to do. This being the case, I have been obliged to allow them to accept many favors from my only sister Octavia. This in ordinary circumstances would not be repugnant to my pride; but my sister is a very unusual person. She must do for my children in her own

way, and while I was prepared, in agreeing that they should accept her bounty, for some whimsical manifestation of her eccentric character, I did not imagine that she would go so far as to shut me out from all knowledge of her plans for them. That, Mr. Ames, is what has happened."

His voice rose and fell mournfully. He puffed his pipe for a moment and continued: —

"Cecilia, being the older, was to be launched first. Hezekiah was to be cared for in due season. Last summer Octavia took them both abroad. As you are aware, they are young women of unusual distinction of appearance and manner, and they attracted a great deal of attention. From what I hear, a troop of suitors followed them about. That sort of thing would appeal to Octavia; to me it is most repellent, but I had already committed myself, agreeing that Octavia should manage in her own fashion. There is now something forward here which I do not understand. I have an idea that Octavia has contrived some preposterous scheme for choosing a husband for Cecilia that is in keeping with her odd fashion of transacting all her business. I do not know its nature, and by the terms of her agreement Cecilia is not to disclose the method to be employed to me, — not even to *me*, her

own father. You must agree, Ames, that that is rather rubbing it in."

"But you don't assume that your daughter is not to be a free agent in the matter? You don't believe that some unworthy and improper man is to be forced upon her?"

"That, sir, is exactly what I fear!"

"You will pardon me, but I cannot for a moment believe that Miss Hollister would risk her niece's happiness even to satisfy her own peculiar humor. Your sister is a shrewd woman, and her heart, I am convinced, is the kindest. Among the suitors now camped at the Prescott Arms there must be some one whom your daughter approves, and I see no reason why he should not ultimately be her choice. Now that you have broached the matter, I make free to say that one of these suitors is an old friend of mine, Hartley Wiggins by name, and that he is a man of the highest character and a gentleman in the strictest sense."

He had been listening to me with the greatest composure, but at the mention of Wiggins's name he started and nervously clutched my arm.

"That man may be all that you say," he cried chokingly, "but he has acted infamously toward both my daughters. He is a rogue, and

a most despicable fellow. He has flirted outrageously with Hezekiah while at the same time pretending to be deeply interested in Cecilia. I say to you in all candor that a man who will trifle with the affections of a child like Hezekiah is a villain, nothing less."

"But, my dear sir, is it not possible that you do him a great wrong? May it not be the other way round, that Hezekiah is trifling with Wiggins's affections? He 's a splendid fellow, Hartley Wiggins, but he 's a little slow, that 's all. And between two superb young women like your daughters a man may be pardoned for doubts and hesitations; a case of being happy with either if t'other dear charmer were only away. To put it quite concretely, I will say that in my own very slight acquaintance with these young women I feel the spell of both. Your sister, I take it, is anxious not to show partiality for any of these men, and yet I dare say she probably feels kindly disposed toward Wiggins. His worst crime seems to be that he chose Tory ancestors! The thing is bound to straighten itself out."

He tossed his head impatiently.

"Has it occurred to you that Octavia's interest in this Hartley Wiggins may be due to a trifling and immaterial fact?"

"Nothing beyond his indubitable eligibility."

"Then let me tell you what I suspect. Both his names contain seven letters. My sister is slightly cracked as to the number seven. I swear to you my belief that the fact that his names contain seven letters each is at the bottom of all this. Incredible, my dear sir, but wholly possible!"

"Then, such being the case, why does n't she show her hand openly? If she believes that Wiggins with his septenary names is ordained by the seven original pleiades to marry your daughter Cecilia, I should think that by the same token she would have sought a man rejoicing in the noble name of Septimus. You send conjecture far when once you entertain so absurd an idea."

"You think my assumption unlikely?" he asked eagerly.

"I certainly do, Mr. Hollister. But I confess that I had never counted the letters in Wiggins's name before, and your suggestion is interesting. And this whole idea of the potential seven in our affairs has possibilities. If seven at all, why is n't it possible that your sister has Jacob in mind and the seven years he served for Rachel? You may as well assume that, as Wiggins is specially favored in the number of letters in his singularly prosaic and unromantic name, it is

Miss Hollister's plan to keep him dallying seven years."

He seized me by the arm and forced me back against the battlements, then stood off and eyed me fiercely.

"You speak of serving and of service! Will you tell me just why you are here and what brings you into this affair! My daughter Hezekiah is the frankest person alive, and she told me of her meetings with you and that you had been to the Asolando, — where she spent a day in the sheerest spirit of mischief. That was the beginning of all our troubles, that damned hole with its insane confectionery and poetry. If Cecilia, in a misguided notion of earning her own living, had not gone there and worn an apron for a week before I dragged her out, she would never have met Wiggins. And now will you kindly tell me just what you are doing in my sister's house, where I have to come like a thief in the night to see one of my own children?"

This fierce deliverance touched me nearly: I doubted my ability to explain to one of these amazing Hollisters just how I came to be sojourning in the house of another of the family without any business that would bear scrutiny. I hastened to declare my profession, and that

I had been summoned by Miss Hollister to examine her chimneys. I could not, however, tell him that until my arrival the chimneys had behaved themselves admirably!

"You 've admitted your friendship for this Wiggins person; that 's enough," he said when I had concluded. "I advise you to leave the house at once. I tell you he 's got to be eliminated from the situation. Understand, that I do not threaten you with violence, but I will not promise to abstain from visiting heavy punishment upon that fellow. And you? A chimney-doctor? I am a man of considerable knowledge of the world, and I say to you very candidly that I don't believe there is any such profession."

"Then let me tell you," I replied, not without heat, "that I am a graduate in architecture, and that if you will do me the honor to consult a list of the alumni of the Institute of Technology, you will find that I was graduated there not without credit. And as for remaining in this house, I beg to inform you, Mr. Hollister, that as I am your sister's guest and as she is perfectly competent to manage her own affairs, I shall stay here as long as it pleases her to ask me to remain. And now, one other matter. How did you gain this roof to-night, when by your own admission you are not on such terms

with your sister as would justify you in entering it openly?"

The moonlight did not fail to convey the contempt in his face, but I thought he grinned as he answered quietly: —

"You don't seem to understand, young man, that you are entitled to no explanations from me. If my sister has her sense of a joke, I assure you that I have mine. I came here to see my daughter. As I taught her to fence when she was ten years old and as she is particularly expert, and moreover, as in my present condition of poverty I have been obliged to forego the pleasure of metropolitan life and to give up my membership in the Fencers' Club, you can hardly deny my right to meet my own daughter for a brief bout anywhere I please. You strike me as a singularly fresh young person. It would be a positive grief to me to feel that my conduct had displeased you. And now, as the night grows chill, I shall beg you to precede me into the house by the way you came."

"But first," I persisted, "let me ask a question. It is possible that you yourself have some preference among your daughter's several suitors, Mr. Hollister. Would you object to telling me which one you would choose for Miss Cecilia?"

"Beyond question, the man for Cecilia, if I have any voice in the matter, is Lord Arrowood."

"Arrowood!" I exclaimed. "You surprise me greatly. I saw him at the inn, and he seemed to me the most insignificant and uninteresting one of the lot."

"That proves you a person of poor gifts of discernment, Mr. Ames;" and his tone and manner were quite reminiscent of his sister's ways; and his further explanation proved him even more worthily the brother of his sister.

"As I was obliged," he began, "owing to an unfortunate physical handicap, to abandon my art, that of a marine painter, I have given my attention for a number of years to the study of the Irish situation. Between the various political parties of Great Britain, poor Ireland can never regain her ancient power. But I see no reason why she should not become once more a free and independent nation. I have gone deeply into Irish history, and I may modestly say that I probably know that history from the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion to the death of Gladstone better than any other living man. I met Arrowood by chance in the highway yesterday, and I found that he holds exactly my ideas."

"But Arrowood is n't an Irishman," I interjected; "neither, I should say, are you!"

"That 's not to the point. Neither was Napoleon a Frenchman strictly speaking; nor was Lafayette an American. A friend of mine in Wall Street is ready, when the time is ripe, to finance the scheme by selling bonds to the multitudes of Irish office-holders throughout the United States, — most of whom are not unknown to the banks."

"And I suppose you and Arrowood would sit jointly in the seat of the ancient kings in Dublin after you had effected your *coup*."

"You lose your bet, Mr. Ames. We have agreed that, as the mayors of Boston for many years have been Irishmen, and as they have, by their prowess in holding the natives in subordination, demonstrated the highest political sagacity, we could not do better than take one of these rulers of the old Puritan capital and place him on the Irish throne. The keen humor of that move would so tickle all interested powers, that the investiture and coronation of the new ruler would be accomplished without firing a shot."

This certainly had the true Hollister touch! Miss Octavia herself could not have devised a more delightful scheme.

"And so," Mr. Bassford Hollister concluded, "I naturally incline toward Arrowood, though he is so poor that he was obliged to come over in the steerage to continue his wooing of my daughter."

He let himself down into the dark trunk-room, waited for me courteously, and walked by my side to the stairway, both of us maintaining silence. I was deeply curious to know how he had entered and whether he expected to go down the front way and out the main door. We kept together to the third-floor hall, — I could have sworn to that; then suddenly, just as we reached the stairway, out went the lights, and we were in utter darkness. I smothered an exclamation, clutched my matches and struck a light, and as the stick flamed slowly, I looked about for Bassford Hollister; but he had vanished as suddenly and completely as though a trap had yawned beneath us and swallowed him. I found the third-floor switch and it responded immediately, flooding the stair-well to the lower hall, but I neither saw nor heard anything more of Hollister.

Astounded by this performance, I continued on to the lower floor to have a look around, and there, calmly reading by the library table, sat Miss Octavia!

"Late hours, Mr. Ames!" she cried. "I supposed you had retired long ago."

I was still the least bit ruffled by that last transaction on the stair, and I demanded a little curtly: —

"Pardon my troubling you; but may I inquire, Miss Hollister, how long you have been sitting here?"

The clock on the stair began to strike twelve, and she listened composedly to a few of the deep-toned strokes before replying.

"Just half an hour. I thought some one knocked at my door about an hour ago. The lights were on and I came down, saw a magazine that had escaped my eye before, and here you find me."

"Some one knocked at your door?"

"I thought so. You know, the servants have an idea that the place is haunted, and I thought that if I sat here the ghost might take it upon himself to walk. I confess to a slight disappointment that it is only you who have appeared. I suppose it was n't you who knocked at my door?"

"No," I replied, laughing a little at her manner, "not unless it was you who switched off the lights as I was coming down from the fourth floor. I have been studying this chimney from

the roof. I know something of the ways of electric switches, and they don't usually move of their own accord."

"Your coming to this house has been the greatest joy to me, Mr. Ames. I should not have imagined, in a chance look at you, that you were psychical, and yet such is clearly the fact. I assure you that I have not touched any switch since I left my room. It was unnecessary, as I found the lights on. And I acquit you of rapping, rapping at my chamber-door. It gives me the greatest satisfaction to assume that the house is haunted, and at any time you find the ghost, I beg that you will lose no time in presenting me. If the prowler is indeed one of King George's soldiers, hanged during the Revolution on the site of this house, I should like to have words with him. I have just been reading an article on the political corruption in Philadelphia in this magazine. It bears every evidence of truth, but if half of it is fiction I still feel that, as an American citizen, though denied the inalienable right of representation assured me in the Constitution, we owe that ghost an apology; for certainly nothing was gained by throwing off the British yoke, and that poor soldier died in a worthy cause."

She wore a remarkable lavender dressing-

gown, and a night-cap such as I had never seen outside a museum. As she concluded her speech, spoken in that curious lilting tone which, from the beginning, had left me in doubt as to the seriousness of all her statements, she rose and, still clasping her magazine, made me a courtesy and was soon mounting the stair.

I heard her door close a minute later, and then, feeling that I had earned the right to repose, I went to my room and to bed.

XI

I PLAY TRUANT

I SLEPT late, and on going down found the table set in the breakfast-room. A pleasant inadvertence marked the choice of eating-places at Hopefield Manor; I was never quite sure where I should find a table spread. No one was about, and I was seized with that mild form of panic familiar to the guest who finds himself late to a meal. As I paused uncertainly in the door, viewing the table, set, I noticed, for only one person, Miss Octavia entered briskly, her slight figure concealed by a prodigious gingham apron.

"Good-morrow, merry gentleman," she began blithely. "The most delightful thing has happened. Without the slightest warning, without the faintest intimation of their dissatisfaction, the house-servants have departed, with the single exception of my personal maid, who, being a Swede and therefore singularly devoid of emotion, was unshaken by the ghost-rumors that have sent the rest of my staff scampering over the hills."

She lighted the coffee-machine lamp in her most tranquil fashion, and begged me to be seated.

"I have already breakfasted," she continued, "and Cecilia is even now preparing you an omelet with her own hand. I beg to reassure you, as my guest, that the *émeute* of the servants causes me not the slightest annoyance. From reading the comic papers you may have gained an impression that the loss of servants is a tragic business in any household, but nothing so petty can disturb me. Cecilia is an excellent cook; and I myself shall not starve so long as I have strength to crack an egg or lift a stove-lid. And besides, I still retain my early trust in Providence. I do not doubt that before nightfall a corps of excellent servants will again be on duty here. Very likely they are even now bound for this place, coming from the wet coasts of Ireland, from Liverpool, from lonely villages in Scandinavia. The average woman would merely fret herself into a sanatorium if confronted with the problem I face this morning, but I hope you will testify in future to the fact that I faced this day in the cheeriest and most hopeful spirit."

"Not only shall I do so, Miss Hollister," I replied, trying to catch her own note, "but it will, throughout my life, give me the greatest satisfaction to set your cause aright. To that extent let me be Horatio to your Hamlet."

"Thank you, milord," she returned, with the

utmost gravity. "And may I say further that the incident gives the stamp of authenticity to my ghost? I was obliged to pay those people double wages to lure them from the felicities of the city, and they must have been a good deal alarmed to have left so precipitately. You must excuse me now, as it is necessary for me to do the pastry-cook's work this morning, that individual having fled with the rest, and it being incumbent on me, to maintain my fee-simple in this property, to make a dozen pies before high noon. But first I must visit the stables, where I believe the coachman still lingers, having been prevented from joining the stampede of the house-servants by the painful twinges of gout."

With this she left me, and I began pecking at a grape-fruit. It had been in my mind as I dressed that morning to play truant and visit the city. It was almost imperative that I take a look at my office, and I had resolved upon a plan which would, I believed, give me the key to the ghost mystery. If Pepperton had built that house he must know whether he had contrived any secret passages that would afford exits and entrances not apparent to the eye. It would be an easy matter to run into the city, explain myself to my assistant, and get hold of Pep-

perton. My mind was made up, and I had even consulted a time-table and chosen one of the express trains. As I sat at the table absorbed in my plans for the day, my nerves received a sudden shock. I had heard no one enter, yet a voice at my shoulder murmured casually:

"Hast thou seen ghosts? Hast thou at midnight heard"—

It was the voice of Hezekiah, I knew, before I faced her. She wore a blue sailor-waist with a broad red ribbon tied under the collar, and a blue tam o'shanter capped her head. She bore a tray that contained my omelet, a plate of toast, and other sundries incidental to a substantial breakfast, which she distributed deftly upon the table.

"How did you get here?" I blurted, my nerves still out of control.

"The kitchen door, sir. I had ridden into the garden, and seeing Aunt Octavia heading for the stables and Cecilia at the kitchen window, I pedaled boldly in. Cecilia wanted to borrow my bicycle, and being a good little sister, I gave it to her. She also said that you required food, so I told her to go and I would carry you your breakfast. I shall skip myself in a minute. You may draw your own coffee. Mind the machine; it tips if you are n't careful."

She went to the window and peered out toward the stables.

"May I ask, Daughter of Kings, where your sister has gone so suddenly?"

"Certainly. She 's off for town to chase a cook and a few other people to run this hotel. I heard at the post-office that the whole camp had deserted, so I ran over to see what was doing; and just for that I 've got to walk home."

"But your aunt said that Providence would take care of the servant question; she expected a whole corps of ideal servants to come straying in during the day."

Hezekiah laughed. (It is not right for any girl to be as pretty as Hezekiah, or to laugh as musically.) She told me to sit down, and as I did so she passed the toast and helped herself to a slice into which she set her fine white teeth neatly, watching me with the merriest of twinkles in her brown eyes.

"Cecilia has n't Aunt Octavia's confidence in Providence, so she 's taking a shot at the employment agencies. She has left a note on the kitchen table to inform Aunt Octavia that she had forgotten an engagement with the dentist and has gone to catch the ten-eighteen."

"That, Hezekiah, is a lie. It is n't quite

square to deceive your aunt that way," I remarked soberly.

Hezekiah laughed again.

"You absurdity! Don't you know Aunt Octavia yet! She will be perfectly overjoyed when she comes back and finds that note from Cecilia. She likes disappearances, mysteries, and all that kind of thing. But it is barely possible that you will have to wash the dishes. I can't, you see, for I 'm not supposed to come on the reservation at all — not until Cecilia has found a husband. Is n't it perfectly delicious?"

"All of that, Daughter of Kings! I think that as soon as I can regain confidence in my own sanity I shall like it myself. But," — and I watched her narrowly, — "you see, Hezekiah, there is really a ghost, you know."

Once more that divine mirth in her bubbled mellowly. She had walked guardedly to the window and turned swiftly with a mockery of fear in her face.

"Aunt Octavia approaches, and I must be off. But that ghost, Mr. Chimney-Man, — when you find him, please let me know. There are a lot of things I want to ask some reliable ghost about the hereafter."

With this she fled, and I heard the front door close smartly after her. An instant later Miss

Octavia appeared and asked solicitously how I liked my omelette.

"The coachman has been telling me a capital ghost-story. He believes them to be beneficent and declares that he will under no circumstances leave my employment."

She sat down and folded her arms upon the table. For the first time I believed that she was serious. There was, in fact, a troubled look on her sweet, whimsical face. It occurred to me that the loss of her servants was not really the slight matter she had previously made of it.

"Mr. Ames, will you pardon me for asking you a question of the most intimate character? It is only after much hesitation that I do so."

I bowed encouragingly, my curiosity fully aroused.

"You may ask me anything in the world, Miss Hollister."

"Then I wish you would tell me whether, — I can't express the dislike I feel in doing this, — but can you tell me whether you have seen in the hands of my niece Cecilia a small — a very small, silver-backed note-book."

"Yes, I have," I answered, greatly surprised.

"And may I ask whether, — and again I must plead my deep concern as an excuse for making

such an inquiry, — whether you by any chance saw her making any notation in that book?"

I recalled the silver-bound book perfectly, but had attached no importance to it; but if Cecilia's fortunes were so intimately related to it as Miss Hollister's manner implied, I felt that I must be careful of my answer. I was trying to recall the precise moment at which I had entered the library the preceding evening after Hume's departure, and while I was intent upon this my silence must have been prolonged. I felt obliged to make an answer of some sort, and yet I did not relish the thought of conveying information that might distress and embarrass a noble girl like Cecilia Hollister. Something in my face must have conveyed a hint of this inner conflict to Miss Hollister, for she rose suddenly, holding up her hand as though to silence me. She seemed deeply moved, and cried in agitation: —

"Do not answer me! The question was quite unfair, — quite unfair, — and yet I assure you that at the moment I made the inquiry, I felt justified."

She retreated toward the door as I rose; and then with her composure fully restored she courtesied gracefully.

"Luncheon here will be a buffet affair to-day, as I shall be engaged with matters of pastry.

I'm sure, however, that you will find employment until dinner-time, when my house will be fully in order again."

I intended that this should be a busy day, so without making explanations I went to the stable, told the coachman I wished to be driven to the station, and was soon whizzing over the hills toward Katonah. The coachman, an Irishman, introduced the subject of the ghost as soon as we were out of sight of the house.

"The ole lady's dipped; she's dipped, sir," he remarked leadingly.

"It's catching," I answered; "so you'd better forget it."

He thereupon settled glumly to his driving. As we crossed the bridge near where I had first encountered Hezekiah in the apple-orchard, I spied her trudging across a meadow, and she waved her hand gaily. Meadows and streams and stars! Of such was Hezekiah's kingdom.

I wondered how Wiggins and the other gentlemen at the Prescott Arms were faring. My question was partially answered a second later, as we passed the road that forked off to the inn. On a stone by the roadside sat Lord Arrowood, desolately guarding a kit-bag and a suit-case. He was dressed in a shabby Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, and sucked a pipe.

I bade the driver pause, and greeted the nobleman affably.

"Can I give you a lift? You seem to be bound for the station, and I'm taking a train myself."

"No, thanks," he replied sharply. "They're a lot of bounders, — bounders, I say!"

"Ah! Of whom do you speak, Lord Arrowwood?" I asked glancing at my watch.

"Those scoundrels at the inn. They have thrown me out. Thrown me out — me!"

"Hard lines, for a fact; but if you are interested in trains" —

"I refuse to leave the county!" he shouted. "If they think they're going to get rid of me they're mistaken. Bounders, I say, bounders!"

He uttered this opprobrious term with great bitterness, and crossed his legs, as though to emphasize his permanence upon the boulder. Patience on a monument is not more eternally planted. He seemed in no mood for conversation, so I sped on, with no time to lose.

I gained the step of the chair-car attached to the ten-eighteen with some loss of dignity, the porter yanking me aboard under the conductor's scornful eye. The Katonah passengers were still in the aisle, and as I surveyed them I saw Cecilia take a seat in the middle of the car. She was just unfolding a newspaper when I moved to a seat behind her and bade her good-morning.

The look she gave me in turning round had in it something of Hezekiah's quizzical humor. This interested me, because I had not previously seen any but the most superficial resemblance between the sisters. Her cheeks were aglow from

her sprint on the wheel. The short skirt and the shirt waist are the true vesture of emancipated woman. Cecilia Hollister, whose apparel at home had struck me as rather formal, seemed this morning quite a new being. She drew a folded veil from the pocket of her jacket, removed her hat, and pinned the veil to it. She kept the hat in her lap, however, and went on talking.

"We are both truants. You must have breakfasted in a hurry to have caught this train."

"Not at all. I enjoyed a brief conversation with your sister, and after she had gone, your aunt came back and lingered for a moment."

"She told you, I suppose, that Providence would look after the servant question."

"She did, just that."

"Well, Providence is hardly equal to getting enough servants to run that place, so I'm going to assist Providence a little."

"You become the vicaress of Providence? I admire your spirit."

"It's mere self-preservation. Aunt Octavia would have me chained to the kitchen if I did n't do something about it."

She had permitted me to settle with the conductor, and when I had completed this transaction I found that she had drawn from her purse the little silver booklet about which Miss Oc-

tavia had inquired so anxiously. She held this close to her eyes, so that I had a clear view of the silver backs, on one of which "C. H." was engraved in neat script. The subjoined pencil she held poised ready for use, touching the tip of it absent-mindedly to her tongue. She raised her eyes with the far-away look still in them.

"Can you tell me how to spell Arrowood, — is it one or two w's?"

"One, I think the noble lord uses."

She seemed to write the name, and I saw her counting on her fingers, touching them lightly on the open page of the book.

Then she dropped it into her purse, which she thrust back carefully into her pocket. She sighed, and was silent for a moment. We were passing a series of huge signs built like a barricade along the right of way, and on one of these I observed with fresh interest an advertisement whose counterpart I had seen often about New York, but without ever observing it attentively. It drew a laugh from me now. It represented an infant in a perambulator, behind which stood the effigy of a capped and aproned nurse. A legend was inscribed on the board to this effect: —

HUSH! BABY'S ASLEEP.

It's a HOLLISTER PERAMBULATOR!

"If it's a Hollister," I remarked as a second of these flew by the window, "it's perfect."

"Oh, those things!" she exclaimed.

"I was n't referring to the perambulator necessarily. Anything that's Hollister must be good."

"We're out of the business, except that Aunt Octavia gets a dollar for every one that's made; but the trust keeps the name."

"The trust could hardly change your name. You will have to do that yourself."

"You've been talking to Hezekiah. That's the way people always talk to her."

"It's certainly not the way I've been talking to you; but we've run away from school, and I'm disposed to make the most of it. Our conversation at your aunt's has been so high up in the air, that it's pleasant to come down to earth and tune it to the less strenuous note of a twentieth-century railway journey."

"That, Mr. Ames, may depend upon the point of view."

"But you will make it yours, won't you? You see, I've always dreamed of adventures, but since I met your aunt in the Asolando they've been coming a little too fast. There's that ghost business. Now I'm going to catch that ghost to-night, if it's the last thing I do!"

"Well, I'm not the ghost, and neither is my father, if that's what's in your mind. Tell me just what you have seen and heard."

I gave her the story in detail, and my recital seemed to amuse her greatly.

"You thought it was Aunt Octavia herself at first, then you thought I was the spook, and now you are not fully persuaded that it is not my father. I will take you into my confidence this far — that I don't know how father got into the house last night. He wrote a note asking me to meet him on the roof and bring the foils. That was not unlike him, as he is the dearest father in the world, and his whims are just as jolly in their way as Aunt Octavia's. I was sure that Aunt Octavia had retired for the night, so I changed my dress and carried the foils up through the trunk-room. I had hardly reached there before my father appeared. The whole situation — my being there and all that — has distressed father a great deal; so I let you see me cry a little. I promise never to do it again."

Mirth brightened the eyes she turned upon me now.

"You think," she asked, "that those lights could n't have winked out twice by themselves while you were on the stairway."

"I am positive of it. And somebody — a

being of some sort — passed me on the stairway. It might imaginably have been you!"

"But I tell you positively it was not."

"Then it might have been your father. A man who can enter a house at will might easily play any manner of other tricks. His disappearance after I had gone down into the house with him was just as mysterious as the ghost."

"It was natural for father not to want you to know how he got in; the motive for that would be the fact that he is not supposed to see me or communicate with me in any way. But you 've got to get a ghost-*motif*."

"I think I have one," I said.

"Then all the rest is easy. To whom does this ghost-*motif* lead you?"

"I need hardly say; for it must have occurred to you that there is one member of the Hollister family we have n't mentioned in this connection."

"If you mean Hezekiah" —

"None other!"

The surprise in her face was not feigned, — I was confident of this, — and the questions evoked by my answer at once danced in her eyes.

"If Hezekiah should be caught in the house just now we should all pay dearly for her rashness. Believe me, this is true. Some day you

may know the whys and wherefores; at present no one may know. There is this, however, — if Hezekiah or my father should be found at Hopefield Manor, anywhere on the premises, while I am there, the consequences would be disastrous, — more so than I dare tell you. But why should Hezekiah wish to prowl about there at night, — to assume for a moment that she is doing it?"

Her manner was wholly earnest. It was plain that she had entered into some sort of a compact with her aunt, and no doubt the arrangement was in the characteristic whimsical vein of which I had enjoyed personal experience. I did not wish to press Cecilia for explanations she might not be free to make, but I ventured a suggestion or two.

"Hezekiah may be entering the house and playing ghost for amusement, merely in a spirit of childish rebellion against the interdiction that forbids her the house. That is quite plausible, Hezekiah being the spirited young person we know her to be. And it may amuse her, too, to plug the chimneys at a time when her sister is enjoying the visits of suitors. Without quite realizing that such was her animus, she may be the least, — the very least bit jealous!"

Cecilia flushed and her eyes flashed indignantly. She bent toward me eagerly.

"Please do not say such a thing! You must not even think it!"

"She may be a little forlorn, alone in your father's house over the hills at times when you are surrounded by admirers, and it is my assumption from what I have learned in one way and another of your flight abroad last summer, that some of these gentlemen now established at the Prescott Arms are known to her."

"Oh, all of them, certainly."

"And Hartley Wiggins among the rest?"

"That, Mr. Ames, is most unkind," she declared earnestly. "She has told me that she was not in the least interested in Mr. Wiggins."

"And she told me the same thing, but I do not feel sure of it! But what if she is! You are not really interested in him yourself!"

In the library at Hopefield Manor I should not have thought of speaking to Cecilia Hollister in any such fashion; but the flying train gave wings to my daring. I was surprised at my own temerity, and more surprised that she did not seem to resent my new manner of speech. She did not, however, vouchsafe any reply to my statement, but changed the subject abruptly.

My description of the ghost had taken considerable time, and we were now running through the tunnels and would soon be at the end of our

journey. She put on her hat and veil without making it necessary for us to discontinue our talk. A certain languor that had marked her at her aunt's vanished. There was a clearer light in her eye, and as I helped her into her coat I felt that here was a woman to whose high qualities I had done scant justice.

"I count on finishing my errand and taking the two-seven," she remarked.

"That's a short time to allow yourself. I've heard that it's a dreary business chasing the employment agencies."

"Not if you know where not to go. If you'll get me a machine of some sort I'll be off at once."

"I fear I shan't conclude my own business so soon; but if you will honor me at luncheon?"—

This last was at the door of a taxicab I had found for her.

"Sorry, Mr. Ames, but it's out of the question. I hope to see you at dinner to-night. And please" —

"Yes, Miss Hollister" —

"Please remember that you are Aunt Octavia's guest, and don't annoy her by failing to appear at dinner. You know you have n't fixed that chimney yet!"

Her smile left me well in the air; I stood staring after the very commonplace cab as it rolled away

with her, my mind a whirling chaos of emotion. The crowd jostled me impatiently; for other people, not breathing celestial ether from an hour of Cecilia Hollister's society, were bent upon the day's business.

I set off at once for Pepperton's office, where I learned that the architect was out of town; but his chief clerk greeted me courteously. I told him frankly that I wanted to look at the plans of Hopefield Manor to enable me to learn the exact lines of the chimneys. He confessed surprise that they were causing trouble, and expressed regret that they were not in the office.

"Miss Hollister sent for them this morning, and I have just given them to a young woman who bore a note from her. Ordinarily I should not have let them go, but the note was peremptory, and Miss Hollister is a friend of Mr. Pepperton's, you know, and a person I'm sure he would not refuse. We're at work now on plans for a cathedral she proposes building for the Bishop of Manila."

I was not surprised that Octavia Hollister should be building cathedrals in the Orient, — I was beyond that, — but I was taken aback to find that she had anticipated me in my rush for the plans of her house. Clearly, I was dealing with a woman who was not only immensely

amusing but exceedingly shrewd as well. Could it be possible after all that she was herself playing ghost merely for her own entertainment! She was capable of it; but I had satisfied myself that she could not have performed the tricks of which I had been the victim the night previous unless she possessed some rare vanishing power like that of the East Indian mystics.

"May I ask who came for the plans?"

"I judged the young woman to be a maid, or perhaps she was Miss Hollister's secretary."

I had given little heed during my short stay at Hopefield Manor to Miss Hollister's personal attendant. I had passed her in the halls once or twice, a young woman of twenty-five, I should say, fair-haired and blue-eyed. She might herself be the ghost, now that I thought of it; but this seemed the most unlikely hypothesis possible, — and there was no difficulty in accounting for her flight to town, for there were many horses and vehicles in the Hopefield stable, and trains were frequent.

"If there is anything further, Mr. Ames" —

I roused myself to find the chief clerk regarding me impatiently, and I thanked him and hurried away.

At my own office my assistant pounced upon me wrathfully. He was half wild over the pres-

sure of vexatious business, and had just been engaging in a long-distance conversation with a country gentleman at Lenox which had left him in bad temper. I was explaining to him the seriousness of my errands at Hopefield, rather unconvincingly I fear, and the fact that I must return at once, when the office-boy entered my private room to say that three gentlemen wished to see me immediately. They had submitted cards, but had refused to state the nature of their business. It was with a distinct sensation of surprise that I read the names respectively of Percival B. Shallenberger, Daniel P. Ormsby, and John Stewart Dick.

"Show the gentlemen in," I said promptly, greatly to the disgust of my assistant, who retired to deal with several clients whom I had passed in the reception-room fiercely walking the floor.

I had imagined all the suitors established at the Prescott Arms. As the three appeared clad in light automobiling coats, I could not forbear a smile at their grim appearance. Shallenberger, the novelist, and Ormsby, the knit-goods manufacturer, were big men; Dick was much shorter, though of compact and sturdy build. They growled surlily in response to my greeting, and Ormsby closed the door behind them. Dick

seemed to be the designated spokesman, and he advanced to the desk behind which I sat, with a stride and manner that advertised his belligerent frame of mind.

"Mr. Ames," he began, "we have come here to speak for ourselves and certain other gentlemen who are staying for a time at the Prescott Arms."

"Gentlemen of the committee, welcome to our office," I replied, greatly amused by his ferocity.

My tone caused the others to draw in defensively behind him.

"We want you to understand that your conduct in accompanying a lady that I shall not name to the city is an act we cannot pass in silence. Your conduct in going to Hopefield Manor was in itself an affront to us, but your behavior this morning passes all bounds. We have come, sir, to demand an explanation!"

At a glance this was a situation I dare not take seriously. In any circumstances the fact that these men had followed me to my office to rebuke me for accompanying Cecilia Hollister to town was absurd. This young Mr. Dick was absurd in himself. His gray cap had twisted itself oddly to the side of his head, and a bang of black hair lay at a piratical angle across his forehead. Behind him Ormsby, the knit-goods man,

tugged at a brown moustache; Shallenberger's blue eyes snapped wrathfully.

"Mr. Dick," I said soberly, "I have heard of you as the original pragmatist of Nebraska, and as I am a mere ignorant chimney-doctor, to whom the later philosophical meaning of that term is only so much punk, I must identify you with that more obvious meaning of the word which is within my grasp. Mr. Dick, and gentlemen of the committee, you are meddlesome persons!"

"Meddlesome!" cried Dick, heatedly, and leaning toward me across my desk, "do I correctly understand, sir, that you mean to insult us?"

"Nothing could be further from my purpose. But I cannot permit you to imagine that I'm going to allow you to beard me in my office and criticise my conduct in regard to Miss Cecilia Hollister or anybody else. As a philosopher from the fertile corn-lands of Nebraska, I salute you with admiration; as a critic of my ways and manners, I show you the door!"

This I did a bit jauntily, and I had a feeling that I was playing my part well. But the young man before me seemed to swell with the rage that surged within him. He broke out furiously, beating the air with his fist.

"You not only insult this committee, but you speak with intentional disrespect of my native state, and of the great philosophical school of which I am a disciple. Am I right?"

"You are eminently right, Mr. Dick. Neither the corn, the philosophical schools, nor the packing-house statistics of your native Omaha interest me a particle. So far as I am personally concerned you may go back to your wigwam on the tawny Missouri as soon as you please."

"Then," he broke forth explosively, "then, sir, by Minerva's pale brow, and by all the gods at once, I brand you"—

"Put the brand on hot, little one! Make it a good strong curse while you're about it!"

He choked with rage for a moment; then he controlled himself with painful effort.

"My personal grievances must wait," continued Dick, brokenly, "but speaking for the committee I wish to say that your attentions to the young lady whom you have dared, sir, to name, are obnoxious to us."

"Nothing less than that!" added Shallenberger.

"We will not stand for it," growled Ormsby's heavy bass.

"Mr. Shallenberger," I replied evenly, "as a member of the great Hoosier school of novelists

I have the most profound respect for your talents. My office-boy is dead to the world for weeks after the appearance of a novel from your pen. But your interference in my private affairs is beyond all reason. And as for you, Mr. Ormsby, I dare say your knit-goods are worthy of the fame of the pent-up Utica from which you come. But to you and all of you, I bid defiance. I return to Hopefield Manor by the four-fourteen express."

I rose and bowed coldly in dismissal; but the trio stood their ground stubbornly.

"I tell you, sir, our organization is complete!" declared Dick. "We signed a gentleman's agreement only last night, for the express purpose of excluding you, and you cannot enter as a competitor. You are only an outsider, and we don't intend to have you interfering with our affairs."

"By the pink left ear of Venus!" I blurted, "is it a trust?"

"You put it coarsely, Mr. Ames, but" —

"A suitors' trust? Then if I read the newspapers correctly, your organization is against public policy and in contravention of the anti-trust law. But may I inquire why, if you have perfected a combination of Miss Hollister's suitors, I found Lord Arrowood this morning sitting on a stone by the roadside, evidently in

the greatest dejection. Can it be possible that an insurgent has crept into your organization and incurred the displeasure of the regulars?"

"We ruled him out," Shallenberger burst forth, "because he was a foreigner and not entitled to a place among free-born Americans! That is one reason; and for another, the colors of his half-hose were an offense to me, personally."

"And for another reason," interposed Ormsby, "he had no money with which to pay his board at the Prescott Arms. For this just cause the landlord ejected him shortly after breakfast this morning."

"Then there is already a rift in the lute!" I returned. "No trust of suitors is stronger than its weakest link. By the bloody footprints of our forefathers on the snows of Valley Forge, I stand for the right of the American girl to choose where she will. You may perch on the hills about Hopefield Manor, and besiege Cecilia Hollister till the end of time, but my hand is raised against your unrighteous compact, and I am in the fight to stay! Go back to the Prescott Arms, gentlemen, and assure your associates in this hideous compact of my most distinguished consideration and tell them to go to the devil."

I had gone to the St. Parvenu Hotel to call

upon a Washington lady who had been making life a burden to my assistant, and on coming out into Fifth Avenue shortly after one, bethought me of the Asolando Tea-Room. My interview with the committee of the suitors had driven from my mind practically every consideration and every interest not centred in Hopefield Manor. My thoughts turned gratefully to the Asolando, where only a few days ago I had been precipitated into the strangest adventures my eventless life had known.

A strange face was visible at the cashier's desk as I entered the tea-room. I passed on, finding the place quite full, but I took it as a good omen that the seventh table from the right was unoccupied, and I hastily appropriated it. A waitress appeared promptly, murmuring, —

"There are no birds in last year's nest," —

and recommended a Locker-Lampson sandwich, whose contents the girl told me were secret, but it proved to be wholly palatable. As I drank my tea and ate the sandwich I surveyed the decorated menu card with interest, and found pleasurable excitement in discovering an item directing attention to "Pickles *à la* Hezekiah, 15 cents." The delightful Hezekiah must, then, have impressed herself upon the *deus ex machina* of the

Asolando on her brief day there, thus to have won this recognition. And further on I noted, among the desserts, *Pêche Cécilie*, with even greater interest and satisfaction. Miss Hollister's nieces were among ten thousand young women, and it was quite believable that their brief tenure of office in the tea-room had fixed them permanently in the heart of the unknown proprietor.

The girl at the cash-desk was reading, her head bent as demurely as Hezekiah's had been on that memorable afternoon; but I did not care for the stranger's profile. I tried to fancy Cecilia in cap and apron serving these tables, but my imagination was not equal to the task.

Cecilia occupied my mind now. The visit of the furious suitors to my office had stirred in me thoughts and aspirations that had never known harborage in my breast before. The presumption of those fellows had exceeded anything I had known in my contact with human kind, and instead of frightening me away from Hopefield Manor, they had called my own attention to the strategic importance of my present position as a guest in Miss Octavia's house. Here was a siege of suitors indeed; but I was resolved to make the most of my position within the barricade.

As these thoughts ran through my mind, I was finishing my *Pêche Cécilie* (I spurn all sweets

ordinarily), when I became interested in the unusual conduct of a young woman who had entered the front door briskly and walked with a business-like air to the cashier's desk. The girl within the wicket rose promptly, opened the screen, and without parley of any sort, emptied the contents of her till into the visitor's reticule. With a nod and a smile and a moment's careless survey of the room, the girl departed, swinging the reticule in her hand. A long roll she carried under her arm confirmed my identification. It was Miss Octavia Hollister's Swedish maid; and the roll, beyond peradventure, contained the plans she had obtained at Pepperton's office.

The girl was well-featured, neat of figure, and becomingly gowned, and as I watched her leave the shop the lightness of her step, something smooth and flowing in her movements, interested me. I did not know what business she had to be robbing the Asolando money-drawer, but it was altogether possible that she was the Hopefield ghost!

On the whole, when I had finally torn myself away from my assistant, — who made no attempt to conceal his doubts as to my sanity, — and had settled myself in the four-fourteen express with the afternoon papers, I was fully satisfied with the day's adventures.

XII

THE RIDDLE OF THE SIBYL'S LEAVES

I HAD told the coachman in the morning not to trouble to meet me on my return, and I engaged the village liveryman to drive me to the house for hire. As we approached Hopefield I saw the Napoleonic figure of John Stewart Dick in the roadway. He had evidently been waiting for me. He held up his hand with the superb, impersonal scorn of a Fifth Avenue policeman, and the driver checked his horse.

"I gave you warning," he said impressively. "If you return to the house the consequences will be upon your own head."

"Thank you," I replied courteously. "You lay yourself open to the severest penalties of the law in attempting to intimidate me. I have enlisted for the whole campaign. Sick chimneys require my immediate professional attention. If my bark sink, 't is to another sea. Be good, dear child, let those who will be clever; and kindly omit flowers."

As the driver slapped his reins, Dick sprang out of the way, muttering words that proved the

shallowness of his philosophic temper. The liveryman expressed his disapproval of the pragmatist in profane terms as we entered the grounds.

"There's a heap o' talk in the village," he observed. "They do say the old lady 's cracked, if I may so speak of her; and that there's ghosts in the house. And the conduct of the gentlemen at the Prescott is most remarkable. The word 's passed that they're all dippy about the young Miss Hollister that lives with her aunt. I reckon all rich people are a bit cracked. It appears to go with the money. Mr. Bassford Hollister, — he's the old lady's brother, — he's just as bad as any of 'em. I've drove in these parts fifteen year, and I've worked a heap for the rich, but I never seen nothin' like the Hollisters. They say Mr. Bassford is about broke now. Had his share of the baby-wagon money and blew it in, and now the old lady 's marryin' off the girls and he gets no money out of her if he takes a hand in that game. She's doin' it to suit herself. That Bassford is always up to somethin' queer. Yesterday he sat in the village street countin' the number of people he saw chewin' gum. Hung around the school-house watchin' the children to see how many had their jaws goin'. Takin' notes just like the census man and tax assessor. Told our doctor in the village he was figurin' the amount of

horse-power the American people put into gum-chewing every year, and expects to find some way of usin' it to run machinery. It's harmless, Doc says. He calls it just the Hollister idiosyncrasy, if that's the word. But I reckon it's idiotsyncrasy all right. I wish you good luck of your place, sir."

He evidently believed me to be some sort of upper servant, and this added to my joy of the day. With my good humor augmented by the interview, I entered the house. A strange footman admitted me, and I went to my room at once without meeting any one else.

The man followed me with a penciled note, signed with Cecilia's initials, requesting my presence below as soon as possible, as she wished to see me before dinner. The thought that she wished to see me at any time filled me with elation; and her few lines scratched on a correspondence card were a pleasing addendum to our conversation of the morning. I only wondered whether I should find her the sober, reserved young woman of our earlier acquaintance, or whether she would choose to renew the good comradeship of our talk on the train. The finding of my assistant's telegraphed resignation on my dressing-table, to take effect in January, had not the slightest effect upon the lofty minarets

in which my fancy now found lodgment. It pleased me to believe that fighting blood still pulsed in the last of the house of Ames, and that I had hurled defiance at the organized band of suitors that guarded the Hopefield gates and picketed the surrounding hills.

My question as to which Cecilia I should find in the library was quickly answered. Her frank smile, the candor of her eyes, confessed a new tie between us; we were becoming conspirators within the main conspiracy, whatever its character might be.

"As to Providence and the cook — what luck?" I asked.

"Oh, I managed that very easily. I ran into some friends who were going abroad for the winter. They have a staff of unusual servants, and were anxious to keep them together until their return. I promptly engaged them all, and they are even now installed. I came up on the train with them, and as they are unusually intelligent and biddable, they agreed to stray in in a casual and desultory way through the afternoon. Aunt Octavia really believed, or pretended she did, which is just as good, that Providence had sent them, and was delighted. The laundress — the last to appear — has just arrived, and Aunt Octavia is in fine humor. She

did n't even ask me how I came off in my encounter at the dentist's. She had filled the pie-pantry and had a good time while I was gone."

"Well, I have had an adventure of my own," I remarked, after expressing my relief that she had solved the servant difficulty with so much ease. "A committee of gentlemen waited on me in my office on a matter of grave importance."

She lifted her brows, and folded her hands upon her knees — it was a pretty way she had.

"Was it the freedom of the city, or some high recognition of your professional ability, Mr. Ames?"

"Oh, far more exciting! Three gentlemen, representing the suitors' trust now maintaining headquarters at the Prescott Arms, warned me solemnly to keep off the grass. In other words, I am not to interfere with their designs upon the heart of Miss Cecilia Hollister."

She flung open a fan, held it at arm's length, and scrutinized the daffodils that were traced upon it.

"So they dared you?"

"So they dared me. And I took the dare."

"Why?"

Her eyes met mine gravely, but behind her pretty *moue* a smile lurked delightfully.

"If I should tell you now it would be flirting, which is a sin."

"I had imagined, Mr. Ames, that that sort of thing came easy to you. But if it's sinful, of course" —

"But you do not rule me out! You will give me a chance" —

My earnestness caused her manner to change suddenly. Her beautiful gravity came like a

swift falling of starlit twilight. I had never been so happy as at this moment. Preposterous as were the circumstances of my presence in the house, the juxtaposition of Cecilia Hollister gave me unalloyed delight. The animosity of the gentlemen at the Prescott Arms — an animosity which the interview in my office had doubtless intensified — quickened my satisfaction in thus being within the walls that guarded the lady of their adoration. She had not answered me, and I felt my heart pounding in the silence.

"I want to serve you, now, hereafter, and always," I added. "These men can have no claim upon you greater than that of any other man who dares!"

"No, none whatever," she replied firmly.

"And the mystery, the whole story, is in the little silver book!"

She started, flushed, and then laughter visited her lips and eyes. The book was not in her hands nor in sight anywhere, but I felt that I was on the right track, and that the little trinket had to do with her plight and her compact with her aunt. Best of all, the fact that I had chanced upon this clue gave her happiness. There was no debating that.

"You had best have a care, Mr. Ames. You have spoken words that would be treasonable if

they came from me, and I must not countenance them."

"But you will tolerate from me words that you would not permit another to speak? Do I go too far?"

She bent her head to one side, — with the slightest inclination, as of a rose touched by a vagrant wind.

"If I could only half believe in you," she said, "you might really serve me. So those gentlemen warned you away! Their presumption is certainly astounding."

"They know nothing of the silver book!"

"They know less than you do, — and you have a good deal to learn, you know."

"I am dull enough, but I have no ambition but to read the riddle of the sibyl's leaves. That and the laying of the ghost are my immediate business. As for the gentlemen at the Prescott, including my old friend Hartley Wiggins, I am not in the least afraid of them. My hand is raised against them. If it's a case of the test of Ulysses over again, I'm as likely as any of them to bend the bow."

I thought this well spoken, but she seemed amused, though without unkindness, by the earnestness of my speech.

"If your wit is equal to your valor, you may

go far. But" — and she turned her eyes full upon me — "we must play the game according to the rules."

"And as for Hartley Wiggins" —

She sat up very straight, and the sudden disdain in her face startled me. I had forgotten my eavesdropping in the clump of raspberries on the day of my arrival. Certainly Wiggins had been decidedly in the race then, and my heart thumped in resentment as I recalled her own message, all compact of encouragement, which I had borne to Wiggins at the Prescott Arms.

"I will tell you something, Mr. Ames. This afternoon, as I drove from the station, I came round by the lake, merely to cool my eyes on the water, and I saw Mr. Wiggins and my sister seated on a wall in an old orchard. They were so busily engaged that they did not see me. At least he did not; but I think Hezekiah did."

"Hezekiah," I answered, relieved by the nature of her disclosure, which could not but prejudice Wiggins' case, "Hezekiah is fond of orchards. I dare say this was the same one in which I had a charming talk with her myself. Doubtless she was amusing herself with Wiggins just as she did with me. She finds the genus homo entertaining."

"She is the dearest girl in the world, — the sweetest, the loveliest, the brightest. Mr. Wiggins has treated her outrageously. He has taken advantage of her youth and susceptible nature."

"His punishment is sure," I answered complacently. "Hezekiah laughed when I mentioned his name. And you frown to-day at the thought of him."

"Aunt Octavia is coming," she remarked, feigning at once a careless air; but I was content that she let my remark pass unchallenged.

Miss Octavia's entrances were always effective. She appeared to-night charmingly gowned, but the bright twinkle in her eyes made it clear that no matter of dress could affect her humor or spirit. She greeted me, as she always did, as though our acquaintance were a matter of years rather than of days. I even imagined that she seemed pleased to find me back again. She asked no questions as to my day's occupations, but as we went in to dinner sallied forth cheerfully upon a description of her own activities.

"After I had baked my required quota of pies this morning, I sought recreation at the traps. The stable-boy who has been pulling the string for me having struck work, it most providentially happened that I espied Lord Arrowood hanging on the edge of the maple tangle beyond

the barn. I summoned him at once and put him to work managing the traps for me, finding him most efficient. He seemed extremely despondent, and after I had satisfied myself that two out of three was not an impossible record for one of my years, I brought him to the house and made tea for him. I left the room for a moment — I had taken him into the kitchen where, during the incumbency of the regular cook I hardly dare venture myself, and he made himself comfortable quite near the range. The pies on which I had been engaged all morning lay cooling near him. I had composed twenty-nine pies, — I am an excellent mathematician, and I could not have been mistaken in the count. What was my amazement to find, after his lordship's departure, that one pie was missing! The pan in which it was baked I discerned later, jammed into a barrel of excellent Minnesota flour. My absence from the room was the briefest; his lordship must indeed be a prestidigitateur to have made way with the pie so expeditiously."

"His lordship was doubtless hungry," I suggested. "Even nobility must eat. I passed Lord Arrowood in the highway early this morning, sitting upon a stone, with sundry items of hand-baggage reposing beside him. I have rarely seen any one so depressed."

"He belongs to an ancient house," remarked Miss Octavia. "He is descended from either Hengist or Horsa, — I forget which, but it does not greatly matter. The missing pie, I may add, was an effect in Westchester pippin; and as our American experiment in self-government bores him, I take it as significant that he chanced upon food that is the veritable sacrament of democracy."

"Now that the little matter of the servants has been adjusted, we must have a care lest the newly-arrived phalanx, which Providence so kindly sent to you to-day, is not stampeded by any further manifestations of the troubled spirit of the unfortunate Briton who was hanged on the site of this house."

"Mr. Ames," replied Miss Octavia impressively, "that matter is entirely in your hands."

"But if I could see the plans of this house, I should be better able to grapple with his ghostship."

I had thrown this out in the hope of eliciting some remark from her touching the Swedish maid's visit to Pepperton's office; but Miss Octavia met my gaze unflinchingly.

"You are a clever man, Mr. Ames, and I have every confidence that you will not only solve the mystery of the library chimney but find the

ghost that switched off the lights on the stair last night. I prefer that you should accomplish these feats without any help from the plans. I myself have no suggestions. I am gratified that you are meeting the emergencies that have risen here with so much determination, but it is what I should expect of the son of Arnold Ames of Hartford. Opportunity is all that any of us need to find ourselves truly great, and if, in the ordinary course of our lives, the gate does not open freely, we are justified in picking the lock. When I determined to seek adventures in my old age, I resolved that I should miss no chance, and that I should be prepared for any beckoning of the hand of fate. An odd fancy struck me at the beginning of my new life that Boston would some day be the starting-point of some interesting experience. This has not yet developed, but in order that I may be prepared for anything that may occur I keep a blue silk umbrella constantly checked at the Parker House. The presence of the little brass check in my purse is a constant reminder that Boston may one day call me."

A discussion of the Parker House umbrella followed, Cecilia and I joining, and it proved so fruitful a topic that it carried us to our coffee.

Coffee-making, in a machine she had herself contrived, was always attended with rites that

required deliberation, and while she performed them Miss Hollister continued to amuse us.

"You may not know," she remarked, in one of her charming irrelevant outbursts, "that the most important furniture transactions effected in this country are those negotiated daily by the head-waiters of the Fifth Avenue restaurants. Such is, I assure you, the fact. These gentlemen, who have attained front rank among our predatory rich, allow no one to dine at the inns they dominate who does not first purchase a table and chairs at a profit of at least two hundred per cent over the original Grand Rapids cost, the furniture thus purchased reverting in every case to the party of the first part after the purchasers have eaten to their satisfaction. The Fifth Avenue head-waiters are not only the most absolute autocrats of our time, but the most acute students of human nature among us. The sale of the tables by the lords of the dining-rooms is alone worth a fortune every season at our fashionable victualing houses and, in addition, the humbler members of the minor orders of waiters, who merely fetch and carry, are obliged to share their gratuities with their august chiefs."

"The system is iniquitous," I declared. "It's enough to pay two prices for the food without buying the hotel furniture."

"The system, Mr. Ames, is wholly admirable, if you will pardon me for expressing a difference of opinion. We cannot do less than admire the austere genius before which mere plutocrats and men of affairs meekly bow. In making my own investments I would rather have the advice of Alphonse at the Hotel Pallida than that of the president of the strongest trust company on Manhattan Island. The varying size of the sums he receives for the dining-room furniture is the best possible indication of the condition of the market. When a citizen of Pittsburg will pay no more than one hundred dollars for the use of a table to eat from at the Pallida you may be sure that a panic impends. By the way, I proposed to Alphonse last winter the organization of a limited company of leading head-waiters to control the waiting industry of Fifth Avenue. It was my idea that some special forms of torture might be devised for calculating persons — usually readers of New York letters in provincial newspapers — who think a waiter entitled to only ten per cent of the bill, and this could best be managed by an arrangement between the five or six magnates who control the more gilded and imposing refectories. I suggested the placing of a special mark in the hats of the ten-per-cent fiends, so that wherever they dine the symbol of

their indiscreet frugalities would be apparent to the initiated eye. It is another of my notions that the head-waiter and his humble slave should present a formal bill for their services, while the hotel or restaurant should merely be tipped. In this way the more important service would receive its due consideration. The sole office of the proprietor is to provide the head-waiter a place in which to follow his profession. Alphonse is impressed with my ideas, and has even offered to make me a director of the company."

"I suppose that you won the regard of Alphonse, the magnificent, only by the most princely tips through many years of acquaintance, Miss Hollister."

"On the other hand, Mr. Ames, I never gave him a cent in my life; but last Christmas, in recognition of his friendliness in warning me against an alligator-pear salad, at a moment when that vegetable was at the turn of the season, I knit him a pair of blue worsted bed-room slippers, which he received with the liveliest expressions of delight."

Three suitors were announced at this moment, and I slipped away without excuses, while Miss Octavia and Cecilia adjourned to the library.

The ghost, I had sworn, should not baffle me another night.

XIII

I DISCOVER TWO GHOSTS

As I crossed the second-floor hall, I passed the Swedish maid, walking toward Miss Octavia's room. I was somewhat annoyed to find, on looking over my shoulder to make sure of her destination, that she, too, had paused, her hand on Miss Octavia's door, and was watching me with interest. She vanished immediately; but to throw her off the track I went to my own room, closed the door noisily, and then came out quickly and ran up to the third floor.

Bassford Hollister's mysterious exit had lingered in my mind as the most curious incident of the eventful Friday night. Having been baffled in my effort to get hold of the architect's plans, my thought now was to await in the upper part of the house a repetition of the various phenomena that had so puzzled me. By the process of exclusion I had eliminated nearly every plausible theory, but if the ghost manifested himself with any sort of periodicity (and the hour of the chimney's queer behavior had been nine) I was now prepared to meet him in

the regions he had chosen for his exploits. When it is remembered that I had always been most timorous, not at all anxious to shine in any heroic performances, it will be understood that the atmosphere of Hopefield Manor was exerting a stimulating effect upon my courage. Or, more likely, my inherent cowardice had been brought into subjection by my curiosity.

I had a pretty accurate knowledge by this time of the position and function of all the electric switches between the lower hall and the fourth floor, but I tested them as I ascended, glancing down now and then to make sure I was not observed. From the sound of voices in the library I judged that most of Cecilia's suitors must now have arrived, and so much the better, I argued; for with Miss Octavia and her niece fully occupied, I could the better carry on my ghost-hunt above stairs.

At a quarter before nine I switched off the lights on the third and fourth floors, and established myself at the head of the stairway, and quite near the trunk-room door. This door I had opened, as I fancied that if Bassford Hollister were at the bottom of the business, he would probably wish to find his way to the roof again. So far as I was able to manage it, the stage was in readiness for the entrance of the goblin. And

I may record my impression, that as we wait for a visitation of this sort, it is with a degree of credence in things supernatural, to which we would not ordinarily confess. In spite of ourselves we expect something to appear, something unearthly, impalpable, and unresponsive to those tests we apply to the known and understood.

The clock below struck nine upon these meditations, and almost upon the last stroke I heard a sound that set my nerves tingling. I crouched in the dark waiting. Some one was coming toward me, but from where? The bottom of a well at midnight was not blacker than the fourth floor, but the switch lay ready to my hand, and my pockets were stuffed with matches of the sort that light anywhere. The stairways were all carpeted, as I have said, and yet some one was ascending bare treads, lightly, and with delays that suggested a furtive purpose. Meanwhile, as a background for this unreality, murmurs of talk and occasional laughter rose from the library.

This concealed stairway, wherever it was, could not be of interminable length, and I had counted, I think, fifteen steps of that strange ascent when it ceased. I heard a fumbling as of some one seeking a latch, and suddenly a light current of air swept by me, but its clean fresh

quality was not in itself disturbing. I stooped and struck a match smartly on the carpet and at the same time clicked the switch. I should say that not more than ten seconds passed from the moment the soft rush of air had first advertised the opening of a passage near me until the hall was flooded with the glow of the electric lamps overhead. My match had also performed its office, but finding the electric current behaving itself normally, I blew it out. What I saw now interested me immensely.

In the solid wall, near the stair, and almost directly opposite the trunk-room, a narrow door had swung outward, — a neat contrivance, so light in its construction that it still swayed on its concealed hinges from the touch of the hand that had released it. How it had opened or what had become of the prowler who had unlatched it remained to be discovered. It seemed impossible that whoever or whatever had climbed the hidden stairway had descended, nor had I been conscious of a ghostly passing as on the previous night. I had only my senses to apply to this problem, and their efficiency was minimized for a moment by fear.

The opening in the wall engaged my attention at once, and I was steadied by the thought that here was a practical matter susceptible of investi-

gation. I stepped within the door and lighted a candle; and just as the wick caught fire, click went a switch somewhere, and out went the hall lamps. But having, so to speak, put my foot to the mysterious stair I would not turn back, and I continued on down the steps.

Great was my astonishment to find that I had apparently stepped from a new into an old house. The stair treads were worn by long use, the plaster walls that inclosed them were battered and cracked, and I seemed to have plunged from the glory of Hopefield into some dim lost passage of a domicile of another era, that lay within or beneath the walls of the Manor. As I slowly descended, holding high my candle, I recalled, not without a qualm, the story of the British soldier whom tradition or superstition linked to the site of Miss Hollister's property. This stairway might certainly have been built in the early days of the republic, and it refuted my disdain of the ghost-myth on the theory that new houses are inhospitable to spirits.

At the foot of the stair I found two rooms, one on either side of a small hall, and these, also, were clearly part of an old house that seemed to be somehow merged into the Hollister mansion. I remembered now that the mansion stood wedged against a rough spur of rock, and that

the front and rear entrances were upon different levels, and it was conceivable that the back part of the mansion might inclose these rooms of an earlier house that had occupied the same site; why they should have been retained was beyond me.

Through the carefully-preserved windows, many-paned and quaint, of these hidden rooms, the infolding walls of the new house were blank and black. An odd thing indeed, that Pepperton should have lent himself to the preservation of a commonplace and thoroughly uninteresting relic, for beyond doubt he must have countenanced it; and Miss Hollister's prompt removal of the plans from the architect's office became more enigmatical than ever.

One door only remained in this shell of the old house, and I hastened to fling it open, still lighting my way with a candle. Before me lay the coal cellar, at which I had merely glanced on the morning after my installation at Hopefield. I now began to get my bearings. I remembered two iron lids in the cemented surface of an area on the east side of the house where fuel was deposited, and mounting a few steps that were of recent construction, and had evidently been built to afford communication between the remnant of the old house and the

subterranean portion of the new, I found to my relief and satisfaction beneath one of these openings a short ladder, through which the court might be reached. Here, then, the manner of ghostly ingress was illustrated by perfectly plausible means. The lid of the coal-hole was entirely withdrawn, and a bar of moonlight lay brightening upon a pile of anthracite at the foot of the ladder.

The ghost I believed to be still in the upper halls of the house, and now that I was in a position to watch the ladder by which he had entered I felt confident that I had cut off his retreat. I was surveying the cellar, when I heard faint sounds in a new direction. Far away under the house, and remote from the secret steps, some one was moving toward me, and rapidly, too! The ghost that I believed to have disappeared into the fourth-floor hall must then have changed the line of his retreat and descended by one of the regular stairways.

I blew out my candle and stood with my back to the wall of the long corridor on which opened the various store-rooms, the heating plant, laundry and other accessories of the modern house. My ghost was coming in haste, — a haste that did not harmonize with the stately tread of the spooks of popular superstition. A slower pace

and I should doubtless have fled before him; but quick light steps echoed in the dark corridor, and I gathered courage from the thought that ghosts create echoes no more than they cast shadows.

As the steps drew nearer I prepared myself to spring upon him. I must unconsciously have taken a step, for he paused suddenly, stood still for a moment, then turned and scampered back the way he had come. After him I went as fast as I could run. The cement-paved corridor was four or five feet wide, and I plunged through the dark at my best speed. At the end of the corridor I was pretty certain of my quarry, and I made ready to grapple with him. Then as I plunged into the wall my hands touched a man's face and for a moment clutched the collar of his coat. He had been waiting for me to strike the wall, and as he slipped out of my grasp he ran back toward the coal cellar. I had struck the wall with a force that knocked the wind out of me, but I got myself together with the loss of only an instant and renewed pursuit. I had no fear but that, if he attempted to reach the open by means of the coal-hole, I should catch him on the ladder, and I sprinted for all I was worth to make sure of him.

My fleeting grasp of the man's collar and the agility with which he had slipped from my clasp

had settled the ghost question, and I had now resolved the intruder into a common thief. As we neared the coal cellar I increased my pace, and felt myself gaining on him; though in the dark I saw nothing until I glimpsed the faint light from the coal-hole.

It had evidently occurred to him by this time that if he tried to climb the ladder I could easily pull him down by the legs; and when he reached the cross hall, he turned quickly and dived through the opening into the hidden chambers. I lost no time in following, but the fellow put up a good race, and as I reached the old stairway he was mounting it two steps at a time, as I judged from the sound. I had hoped to catch and dispose of him without alarming the house, but it seemed inevitable now that the chase would end in such fashion as to arouse the company assembled in the library.

I heard him stumble and fall headlong at the door above; then he shot off into the still darkened hall, and when I had gained the top I lost track of him for a moment. I paused and was about to strike a match, when he resumed his flight, and I was forced to grapple with the fact that some one else was pursuing him. I held my match unstruck upon this new disclosure, and stepped back within the concealed door and

waited. Up and down the hall, two persons were running, and when they reached the ends of the corridor I heard hands touch the wall and the sound of dodging, and then almost instantly the two runners flashed by me again. The hall was so dark that I saw nothing, but as the runners passed the door I felt the rush of air caused by their flight.

Three or four times this had happened, and then, still without having made a light, I thrust out my foot at the next return of the unseen runners. Some one tripped and fell headlong, and I promptly flung myself upon him.

My prisoner's resistance engaged my best attention a moment, but when I had sat upon his legs and got hold of his struggling hands, some one stole softly by me. My prisoner, too, heard and was attentive. Not only did I experience the same sensation as on the previous night, of a passing near by, but I was conscious of the same faint perfume, as of a flower-scent half-caught in a garden at night, that had added to my mystification before. Then without the slightest warning the lights flashed on, and a door closed somewhere, but it was not the hidden one leading down into the remnant of the old house, for my prisoner's head and shoulders lay across its threshold. He sighed deeply, bringing my dazed

wits back to him, and I found myself gazing into the blinking eyes of Lord Arrowood.

"Bounders, I say, bounders!" he gasped.

"In the circumstances, Lord Arrowood, I should not call names. Will you tell me what you mean by running through this house in this fashion? Stand up and give an account of yourself."

I helped him to his feet and bent over the stair-rail leading down to the third floor. Evidently our strange transactions beneath and above had not disturbed the assembled suitors and their hostesses; but in common decency Lord Arrowood must be disposed of promptly; there was no doubt about that.

"I was an ass to try it," muttered his lordship, pulling his tie into shape. "And now I want to get out. I want to go away from here."

He was tugging at the belt of his Norfolk coat, and something between it and his waistcoat evidently gave him concern. It did not seem possible that he was really a thief, with chattels concealed on his person, but he continued to smooth his jacket anxiously, meanwhile eyeing me apprehensively. He puffed hard from his recent game of hide-and-seek, and his face was wet with perspiration. Our conversation was carried on in half-whispers. He was so crestfallen

that if it had n't been for the necessity of maintaining silence I should have laughed outright.

"Out with it, my lord. What have you stuck in your coat?"

"They're bounders, all the rest of 'em," he asserted doggedly, "but I believe you to be a gentleman."

"I thank you, Lord Arrowood, for this mark of confidence; but you have led me a hot chase through this house, and it is clear that you have something tucked under your coat that you have seized feloniously. We're standing here in the light, and our voices may at any moment attract Miss Hollister and the others in the library. Open your coat! I declare that even if you have lifted a bit of the Hollister plate I will let you go. My lord, if you please, stand and unfold yourself!"

Reluctantly, shamefacedly, and still breathing hard from his late exertions, Lord Arrowood of Arrowood, Hants, England, obeyed me. There were five buttons to the close-fitting jacket, and the loosening of every succeeding one seemed to give him pain. Then with his head slightly lifted as though in disdain of me, he held out for my observation a pie, in the pan in which it had been baked! The top crust was browned to a nicety; its edges were crimped neatly; and in spite of the

fact that I had so lately dined sumptuously at Miss Hollister's hospitable board, at sight of this alluring pastry I experienced the sharp twinges of aroused appetite.

"Now you have it, and I hope you are satisfied," said Lord Arrowood. "Kindly allow me to retire by the way I came."

"First," I replied, sobered by the gravity of

his manner, "it would interest me as a student of character to know just what species of pie lured you to this burglarious deed."

"I have reason to think," he answered, with tears in his eyes, "that it is a gooseberry. I was damned hungry, if you must know the truth, and having sampled the old lady's pies this morning, and had nothing to eat since, I saw the coal-hole open and ladder beneath, and the rest of it was easy. If you and the other chap had n't chased me all over the estate, I'd have been off with my pie and no harm done. The old lady 's insane, you know, and has no manner of use for pies. The house is haunted in the bargain. When you had about winded me down in the cellar and cut me off from the ladder and chased me up here, the ghost took a hand, and if you had n't tripped me and sat on me the spirits would certainly have nailed me. O Lord, what a night!"

"It's your impression then that when you got up here somebody else broke into the game."

"Quite that, only I should say some*thing*, not some*body*. It was a lighter step than yours. It had its hand on me once; but I could n't touch it. Damn me," he concluded hoarsely, "it was n't there to touch!"

"You are sure you speak the truth when you say that the coal-hole was open and that you found the ladder there when you came?"

"No manner of doubt of it. As I have already said, I believe you to be a gentleman, and between gentlemen certain confidences may pass that would n't be possible between a gentleman and those *canaille* down there."

He jerked his head scornfully to indicate the suitors below.

I bowed with such dignity as is possible in addressing a nobleman whom you have just caught in the act of lifting a gooseberry-pie from a lady's pantry, — a pie which you hold perforce in your hands.

"The fact is that I was without the price of food; and to repeat, I was beastly hungry."

"Poverty and hunger, my lord, are pardonable sins. And I dare say that Miss Hollister would be highly pleased to know that a gentleman of your high position — she told me herself that you were descended from the Jutish chiefs — had paid so high a compliment to the excellence of her pastry. Your only error, as I view the matter, lies in the fact that you have laid felonious hands upon a gooseberry-pie. All gooseberry pastries are sacred to Hezekiah. My impressions of Hezekiah are the pleasantest, and I cannot

allow you to intervene between her and the pie I hold in my hands. If you will accompany me below, I will undertake to gain access to the pie vault, return this pie to its proper place, and hand you, at the foot of the ladder, an apple-pie in place of it. I dare say it never will be missed; but from what I know of Hezekiah, any trifling with her appetite would be a crime indictable at common law."

His lordship seemed reassured, and we were about to descend by the concealed stair when he arrested me.

"Mr. Ames, you are a gentleman, and possess a generous heart. We understand each other perfectly. And as I have every reason to believe that my suit is hopeless, I ask the loan of five dollars until I can confer with my friend the British consul at New York. I shall sail at once for England."

I was moved to pity by his humility. A man who, finding himself reduced to larceny by hunger, and being unable to win the woman of his choice, meekly yields to the inevitable, is not a fair mark for contumely. He stepped down before me into the dark stairway, and I closed the door after me and followed him.

I found my way to the pie pantry without difficulty, returned the gooseberry-pie to its proper

shelf, chose an apple-pie and gave it, with a five-dollar note, to Lord Arrowood.

At the bottom of the ladder he pressed my hand feelingly, and expressed his gratitude in terms that would have touched a harder heart than mine.

Then having closed the coal-hole and hidden the ladder under a pile of wood, I resumed my pursuit of the ghost.

XIV

LADY'S SLIPPER

I LIGHTED my way with a candle through the lost chambers of the old house, up the hidden stairway, and out into the fourth-floor hall again. The old stair, I found on closer observation, reached only from the second to the fourth floor, and below this had been pieced with lumber carefully preserved from the earlier house. There was nothing so strange after all about the hidden stairway, though I was convinced that this had been no idea of Pepperton's, but that he had merely obeyed the orders of his eccentric client, the umbrella and dyspepsia-cure millionaire.

I had no sooner let myself through the secret door into the upper hall than I was aware of a disturbance in the library below. I heard exclamations from the men, and as I ran down toward the third floor Miss Octavia's voice rose above the tumult.

"We must have patience, gentlemen. Chimneys are subject to moods just like human beings; and we are fortunate in having in the house a gentleman who is an expert in such matters.

I do not doubt that Mr. Ames even now has his hand upon the chimney's pulse, and that he will soon solve this perplexing problem."

"If you wait for that man to mend your chimney you will wait until doomsday."

So spake John Stewart Dick, taking his vengeance of me with my client and hostess. I might have forgiven him; but I could not forgive Hartley Wiggins.

"He does n't know any more about chimneys than the man in the moon," my old friend was saying, between coughs.

And then quite unmistakably I smelt smoke, and bending further over the rail and peering down the stair-well I saw smoke pouring from the library into the hall. It seemed to be in greater volume to-night than at previous manifestations. A gray-blue cloud was filling the lower hall and rising toward me. I ran quickly to the third floor, to the chamber whose fireplace was served by the library chimney. The lights in the third-floor hall winked out as I opened the door, —I heard a step behind me somewhere; but I did not trouble about this. The switch inside the unused guest-chamber responded readily to my touch, and on kneeling by the hearth I found it cold, as I had expected. There was absolutely no way of choking the library flue at this point, for,

as I had established earlier, all the fireplaces in this chimney had their independent flues. Pepperton would never have built them otherwise, and no one but a skilled mason could have tapped the library flue here or higher up, and the work could not have been done without much noise and labor.

The hall outside was still dark, and I did not try the switch. The pursuit was better carried on in darkness, and I had by this time become accustomed to rapid locomotion through unlighted passages. I leaned over the stair-well and heard exclamations of surprise at the sudden cessation of the smoke, which had evidently abated as abruptly as it had begun. The windows and doors had been opened, and the company had returned to the library.

"Quite extraordinary. Really quite remarkable!" they were saying below. I heard Cecilia's light laughter as the odd ways of the chimney were discussed. And as I stood thus peering down and listening, the Swedish maid's blonde head appeared below me, bending over the well-rail on the second floor. She too was taking note of affairs in the library, and as I watched her she lifted her head and her eyes met mine. Then, while we still stared at each other, the second-floor lights went out with familiar abruptness,

and as I craned my neck to peer into the blackness above me I experienced once more that ghostly passing as of some light, unearthly thing across my face. I reached for it wildly with my hands, but it seemed to be caught away from me; and then as I fought the air madly, it brushed my cheek again. I have no words to describe the strange effect of that touch. I felt my scalp creep and cold chills ran down my spine. It seemingly came from above, and it was not like a hand, unless a hand of wonderful lightness! Certainly no human arm could reach down the stair-well to where I stood. And in that touch to-night there was something akin to a gentle, lingering caress as it swept slowly across my face and eyes.

I waited for its recurrence a moment, but it came no more. Then on a sudden prompting I stole swiftly to the fourth floor, lighted my candle, and gazed about. I thought it well to let the electric light alone, for my ghost had once too often plunged me into darkness at critical moments, and a candle in my hands was not subject to his trickery.

The hall was perfectly quiet. The door leading down the hidden stair was invisible, and I had not yet learned how it might be opened from the hall, though Mr. Bassford Hollister had un-

doubtedly left the house by this means after my interview with him on the roof. And reminded of the roof, I opened the trunk-room door and peered in. The candle-light slowly crept into its dark corners, and looking up I marked the presence of the trap-door secure in the opening. As I stood on the threshold of the trunk-piled room, my hand on the knob and the candle thrust well before me, I heard a slight furtive movement to my left and behind the door. I was quite satisfied now that I was about to solve some of the mysteries of the night, and to make sure I was unobserved — for having gone so far alone I wanted no partners in my investigations — I listened to the murmur of talk below for a moment, then cautiously advanced my candle further into the room. I was not yet so valiant, even after all my night-prowlings and explorations of hidden chambers, but that I thrust the light in well ahead of me and bent my wrist so that the candle's rays might dispel the last shadow that lurked behind the door before I suffered my eyes to look upon the goblin. I took one step and then cautiously another, until the whole of the trunk-room was well within range of my vision.

And there, seated on a prodigious trunk frescoed with labels of a dozen foreign inns, I beheld Hezekiah!

As I recall it she was very much at her ease. She sat on one foot and the other beat the trunk lightly. She was bareheaded, and the candlelight was making acquaintance with the gold in her hair. She wore her white sweater, as on that day in the orchard; and with much gravity, as our eyes met, she thrust a hand into its pocket and drew out a cracker. I was not half so surprised at finding her there as I was at her manner now that she was caught. She seemed neither distressed, astonished nor afraid.

"Well, Miss Hezekiah," I said, "I half suspected you all along."

"Wise Chimney-Man! You were a little slow about it though."

"I was indeed. You gave me a run for my money."

She finished her cracker at the third bite, slapped her hands together to free them of possible crumbs, and was about to speak, when she jumped lightly from the trunk, bent her head toward the door, and then stepped back again and faced me imperturbably.

"And now that you've found me, Mr. Chimney-Man, the joke's on you after all."

She laid her hand on the door and swung it nearly shut. I had heard what she had heard: Miss Octavia was coming upstairs! She had

exchanged a few words with the Swedish maid on the second-floor landing, and Hezekiah's quick ear had heard her. But Hezekiah's equanimity was disconcerting: even with her aunt close at

hand she showed not the slightest alarm. She resumed her seat on the trunk, and her heel thumped it tranquilly.

"The joke's on you, Mr. Chimney-Man, because now that you've caught me playing tricks you've got to get me out of trouble."

"What if I don't?"

"Oh, nothing," she answered indifferently, looking me squarely in the eye.

"But your aunt would make no end of a row; and you would cause your sister to lose out with Miss Octavia. As I understand it, you're pledged to keep off the reservation. It was part of the family agreement."

"But I'm here, Chimney-pot, so what are you going to do about it?"

"Mr. Ames! If you are ghost-hunting in this part of the house" —

It was Miss Octavia's voice. She was seeking me, and would no doubt find me. The sequestration of Hezekiah became now an urgent and delicate matter.

"You caught me," said Hezekiah, calmly, "and now you've got to get me out; and I wish you good luck! And besides, I lost one of my shoes somewhere, and you've got to find that."

In proof of her statement she submitted a shoeless, brown-stockinged foot for my observation.

"The one I lost was like this," and Hezekiah thrust forth a neat tan pump, rather the worse for wear. "I was on the second floor a bit ago," she began, "and lost my slipper."

"In what mischief, pray?"

"Mr. Ames," called Miss Octavia, her voice close at hand.

"I wanted to see something in Cecilia's room; so I opened her door and walked in, that's all," Hezekiah replied.

"Wicked Hezekiah! Coming into the house is bad enough in all the circumstances. Entering your sister's room is a grievous sin."

"If, Mr. Ames, you are still seeking an explanation of that chimney's behavior" —

It was Miss Octavia, now just outside the door.

"Don't leave that trunk, Hezekiah," I whispered. "I'll do the best I can."

Miss Octavia met me smilingly as I faced her in the hall. She had switched on the lights, and my candle burned yellowly in the white electric glow.

Miss Octavia held something in her hand. It required no second glance to tell me that she had found Hezekiah's slipper.

"Mr. Ames," she began, "as you have absented yourself from the library all evening, I assume that you have been busy studying my chimneys and seeking for the ghost of that British soldier who was so wantonly slain upon the site of this house."

"I am glad to say that not only is your sur-

mise correct, Miss Hollister, but that I have made great progress in both directions."

"Do you mean to say that you have really found traces of the ghost?"

"Not only that, Miss Hollister, but I have met the ghost face to face, — even more, I have had speech with him!"

Her face brightened, her eyes flashed. It was plain that she was immensely pleased.

"And are you able to say, from your encounter, that he is in fact a British subject, uneasily haunting this house in America long after the Declaration of Independence and Washington's Farewell Address have passed into literature?"

"You have never spoken a truer word, Miss Hollister. The ghost with whom or which I have had speech is still a loyal subject of the King of England. But by means which I am not at liberty to disclose, I have persuaded him not to visit this house again."

"Then," said Miss Hollister, "I cannot do less than express my gratitude; though I regret that you did not first allow me to meet him. Still, I dare say that we shall find his bones buried somewhere beneath my foundations. Please assure me that such is your expectation."

She was leading me into deep water, but I had skirted the coasts of truth so far; and with Heze-

kiah on my hands I felt that it was necessary to satisfy Miss Hollister in every particular.

"To-morrow, Miss Hollister, I shall take pleasure in showing you certain hidden chambers in this house which I venture to say will afford you great pleasure. I have to-night discovered a link between the mansion as you know it and an earlier house whose timbers may indeed hide the bones of that British soldier."

"And as for the chimney?"

"And as for the chimney, I give you my word as a professional man that it will never annoy you again, and I therefore beg that you dismiss the subject from your mind."

I saw that she was about to recur to the shoe she held in her hand and at which she glanced frequently with a quizzical expression. This, clearly, was an issue that must be met promptly, and I knew of no better way than by lying. Hezekiah herself had plainly stated, on the morning of that long, eventful day, when she walked into the breakfast-room in her aunt's absence and explained Cecilia's trip to town, that it was perfectly fair to dissimulate in making explanations to Miss Hollister; that, in fact, Miss Octavia enjoyed nothing better than the injection of fiction into the affairs of the matter-of-fact day. Here, then, was my opportunity.

Hezekiah had thrown the responsibility of contriving her safe exit upon my hands. No doubt, while I held the door against her aunt, that remarkable young woman was coolly sitting on the trunk within, eating another cracker and awaiting my experiments in the gentle art of lying.

"Miss Hollister," I began boldly, "the slipper you hold in your hand belongs to me, and if you have no immediate use for it I beg that you allow me to relieve you of it."

"It is yours, Mr. Ames?"

A lifting of the brows, a widening of the eyes, denoted Miss Octavia's polite surprise.

"Beyond any question it is my property," I asserted.

"Your words interest me greatly, Mr. Ames. As you know, the grim hard life of the twentieth century palls upon me, and I am deeply interested in everything that pertains to adventure and romance. Tell me more, if you are free to do so, of this slipper which I now return to you."

I received Hezekiah's worn little pump into my hands as though it were an object of high consecration, and with a gravity which I hope matched Miss Octavia's own. I was, I think, by this time completely hollisterized, if I may coin the word.

"As I am nothing if not frank, Miss Hollister,

I will confess to you that this shoe came into my possession in a very curious way. One day last spring I was in Boston, having been called there on professional business. In the evening, I left my hotel for a walk, crossed the Common, took a turn through the Public Garden, where many devoted lovers adorned the benches, and then strolled aimlessly along Beacon Street."

"I know that historic thoroughfare well," interrupted Miss Hollister, "as my friend Miss Prudence Biddeford has lived there for half a century, and once, while I was staying in her house, she gave me her recipe for Boston brown bread, thereby placing me greatly in her debt."

"Then, being acquainted with the neighborhood and its sublimated social atmosphere, you will be interested in the experience I am about to describe," I continued, reassured by Miss Octavia's sympathetic attention to my recital. "I was passing a house which I have not since been able to identify exactly, though I have several times revisited Boston in the hope of doing so, when suddenly and without any warning whatever this slipper dropped at my feet. All the houses in the neighborhood seemed deserted, with windows and doors tightly boarded, and my closest scrutiny failed to discover any opening from which that slipper might have been

flung. The region is so decorous, and acts of violence are so foreign to its dignity and repose, that I could scarce believe that I held that bit of tan leather in my hand. Nor did its unaccountable precipitation into the street seem the act of a housemaid, nor could I believe that a nursery governess had thus sought diversion from the roof above. I hesitated for a moment not knowing how to meet this emergency; then I boldly attacked the bell of the house from which I believed the slipper to have proceeded. I rang until a policeman, whose speech was fragrant of the Irish coasts, bade me desist, informing me that the family had only the previous day left for the shore. The house he assured me was utterly vacant. That, Miss Hollister, is all there is of the story. But ever since I have carried that slipper with me. It was in my pocket to-night as I traversed the upper halls of your house, seeking the ghost of that British soldier, and I had just discovered my loss when I heard you calling. In returning it you have conferred upon me the greatest imaginable favor. I have faith that sometime, somewhere, I shall find the owner of that slipper. Would you not infer, from its diminutive size, and the fine, suggestive delicacy of its outlines that the owner is a person of aristocratic lineage and of breeding? I will confess that

nothing is nearer my heart than the hope that one day I shall meet the young lady — I am sure she must be young — who wore that slipper and dropped it as it seemed from the clouds, at my feet there in sedate Beacon Street, that most solemn of residential sanctuaries."

"Mr. Ames," began Miss Hollister instantly, with an assumed severity that her smile belied, "I cannot recall that my niece Hezekiah ever visited in Beacon Street; yet I dare say that if she had done so and a young man of your pleasing appearance had passed beneath her window, one of her slippers might very easily have become detached from Hezekiah's foot and fallen with a nice calculation directly in front of you. But now, Mr. Ames, will you kindly carry your candle into that trunk-room?"

And I had been pluming myself upon the completeness of my hollisterization! There was nothing for me but to obey, and my heart sank as my imagination pictured Hezekiah's discomfiture when we should find her seated on the huge trunk behind the door. And that stockinged foot already called in appealing accents to the shoe I held in my hand! The foundations of the world shook as I remembered the compact by which Hezekiah was excluded from the house, and realized what the impending discovery

would mean to Cecilia, her father, and the wayward Hezekiah, too! But I was in for it. Miss Octavia indicated by an imperious nod that I was to precede her into the trunk-room, and I strode before her with my candle held high.

But the sprites of mystery were still abroad at Hopefield. The room was unoccupied save for the trunks. Hezekiah had vanished. Instead of sitting there to await the coming of her aunt, she had silently departed, without leaving a trace. Miss Hollister glanced up at the trap-door in the ceiling, and so did I. It was closed, but I did not doubt that Hezekiah had crawled through it and taken herself to the roof. Miss Octavia would probably order me at once to the battlements; but worse was to come.

"Mr. Ames," she said, "will you kindly lift the lid of that largest trunk."

I had not thought of this, and I shuddered at the possibilities.

She indicated the trunk upon which Hezekiah had sat and nibbled her cracker not more than ten minutes before. Could it be possible that when I lifted the cover that golden head would be found beneath? My life has known no blacker moment than that in which I flung back the lid of that trunk. I averted my eyes in dread of the impending disclosure and held the candle close.

But the trunk was empty, incredibly empty! My courage rose again, and I glanced at Miss Octavia triumphantly. I even jerked out the trays to allay any lingering suspicion. Why had I ever doubted Hezekiah? Who was she, the golden-haired daughter of kings, to be caught in a trunk? She had slipped up the ladder while I talked to her aunt and was even now hiding on the roof; but it was not for me to make so treasonable a suggestion. Miss Octavia might press the matter further if she liked, but I would not help her to trap Hezekiah.

Miss Hollister did not, to my surprise and relief, suggest an inspection of the roof. She nodded her head gravely and passed out into the hall.

"Mr. Ames, if I implied a moment ago that I doubted your story of the dropping of that tan pump from a Beacon Street roof or window, I now tender you my sincerest apologies."

She put out her hand, smiling charmingly.

"Pray return to the occupations which were engaging you when I interrupted you. You have never stood higher in my regard than at this moment. To-morrow you may tell me all you please of the ghost and the mysteries of this house, and I dare say we shall find the bones of that British soldier somewhere beneath the

foundations. As for that trifling bit of leather you hold in your hand, it's rather passé for Beacon Street. The next time you tell that story I suggest that you play your game of drop the slipper from a window in Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia. Still, as I always keep an umbrella in the check-room of the Parker House, I would not have you imagine that I look upon Boston as an unlikely scene for romance. The last time I was there a Mormon missionary pressed a tract upon me in the subway, and I can't deny that I found it immensely interesting."

XV

LOSS OF THE SILVER NOTE-BOOK

HEZEKIAH on the roof was safe for a time. Miss Octavia's gentle rejection of my Beacon Street anecdote and her intimation that Hezekiah had been an unbilled participant in the comedy of the ghost had been disquieting, and in my relief at her abandonment of the search I loitered on downstairs with my hostess. I wished to impress her with the idea that I was without urgent business. Hezekiah would, beyond doubt, amuse herself after her own fashion on the roof until I was ready to release her. As I had quietly locked the trunk-room door and carried the key in my pocket I was reasonably sure of this. Humility is best acquired through tribulation, and as Hezekiah sat among the chimney-crocks nursing one stockinged foot and waiting for me to turn up with her lost slipper, it would do her no harm to nibble the bitter fruit of repentance with another biscuit. I should find her much less sure of herself when I saw fit to seek her on the roof. It was a pretty comedy we were playing, but it was best that she should not too complacently take

all the curtains. Hezekiah's naughtiness had been diverting up to a point now reached and passed, but the time had arrived for remonstrance, admonition, discipline. And it should be my grateful task to point out the error of her ways and urge her into safer avenues of conduct. Such were my reflections as I attended Miss Octavia in her descent.

The memoranda of my adventures at Hopefield Manor fall under two general headings. On the one hand was the ghost and the library chimney; on the other the extraordinary gathering of Cecilia's suitors. As I followed at Miss Octavia's side, she seemed to have dismissed the ghost and the fractious chimney from her mind; her humor changed completely. As in the morning when, unaccountably abandoning her habitual high-flown speech, she had asked me about Cecilia's silver note-book, she seemed troubled; and when we had reached the second floor she paused and lost herself in unwonted preoccupation.

"Let us sit here a moment," she said, indicating a long davenport in the broad hall. For the first time her manner betrayed weariness. She laid her hand quietly on my arm and looked at me fixedly. "Arnold," she said, — "you will let me call you Arnold, won't you?" she added

plaintively, and never in my life had I been so touched by anything so sweet and gentle and kind, — "Arnold, if an old woman like me should do a very foolish thing in following her own whims and then find that she had probably committed herself to a course likely to cause unhappiness, what would you advise her to do about it?"

"Miss Hollister," I answered, "if you trusted Providence this morning to send you a corps of servants when yours had been most unfortunately scattered by ghosts or rumors of ghosts, why will you not continue to have confidence that your affairs will always be directed by agencies equally alert and beneficent?"

She flashed upon me that rare wonderful smile of hers; she looked me in the eyes quizzically with her head bent slightly to one side; but for once her usual readiness seemed to have forsaken her. Could it be possible that she was losing faith in her own play-world, and that the tuneful trumpets of adventure and romance which she had set vibrating on her own key jarred dully in her ears? It passed swiftly through my mind that it was incumbent on me to win her back to complete belief in the potency of the oracles that had called to her old age. She had dipped her paddle into bright waters and had splashed up all man-

ner of gay imaginings, and what disasters awaited her now if she beached her argosy and found no gold at the end of the rainbow! It occurred to me, prosaic man and chimney-doctor that I was, that no one should be disappointed who has heard the dream-gods calling at twilight, or wakened to the chanting of the capstan-song, or heard the timbers creaking in the stout old caravel of romance as it wallows in the seas that wash the happy isles. I had not crawled through so many chimneys but that I still believed that dreams come true, not because they will but because they must! And in the case of Miss Octavia Hollister I felt a great responsibility; for what irremediable loss might not result to a world too little given these days to dreaming, if she, who at sixty had turned her heart trustfully to adventure, should find only sorrow and disappointment? The thing must not be! I was feeling the least bit elated over my success in solving the riddle of the ghost, and I knew that the hidden chambers and stair would delight her when I revealed them on the morrow; so I quite honestly sought to restore her to the joy of life. I felt that she was waiting for me to speak further, and I plunged ahead.

"Our meeting in the Asolando was the most interesting thing that ever happened to me, Miss Hollister. I was rapidly becoming hope-

lessly cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in to saucy doubts and fears as to the promise of life held out to us in the nursery, where, indeed, all education should begin and end. Your appearance at the Asolando that afternoon was well-timed to save me from death in a world that was rapidly losing for me all its illusion and witchery. But now that you have so readily won me back to the true faith, I beg of you do not yourself revert to the dreary workaday world from which you rescued me."

I had never in my life spoken more sincerely. I had never been so happy as since I knew her, and I was pleading for myself as well as for her — there where, from her own doorstep and in her own garden, one who listened attentively might hear the faint roar of trains bound toward the teeming city along iron highways. It was with relief that I saw my words had struck home. She touched my hand lightly; then she took it in both her own.

"You really believe that; you are not merely trying to please me?"

"I was never half so much in earnest! Please go on in the way you have begun. And have no fear that the charts will mislead you, or that the seas will grind your bark on hidden shoals. Shipwreck, you know, is one of the greatest joys of

our adventures, — we have to be wrecked first before we find the island of the treasure-chests."

She sighed softly, but I felt that her spirits were rising.

"But those men down there? How shall I manage that?" she asked eagerly.

I snapped my fingers. We must get back into the air again. And it was remarkable how readily my long-untried wings bore me upward. The earth, after all, does not bind us so fast!

"I don't know the game; but I have found out a lot of things without being told, so tell me nothing! Remember that I have something quite remarkable, startling even, to show you to-morrow. I have even overcome, you know, the obstacle you placed in the way of my discoveries by sending in ahead of me this morning for the plans of the house."

I watched her narrowly, but she was in no wise discomfited.

"Well, I burned them the moment Hilda brought them back," she laughed. "I had faith in you, and I wanted you to manage it all for yourself. I rather guessed that you would go to Pepperton. That was when I still believed."

"But you must go on believing. Make-believing is the main cornerstone and the keystone of the arch of the happy life."

"You are sure you are not mocking a foolish old woman?"

"You are the wisest woman I ever knew!" I asserted, and my heart was in the words.

"I believe you have persuaded me; but Cecilia" —

She was again at the point of loosening her hold upon the cord that linked her shallop to Ariel's isle, but my own youth was resurgent in me.

I rose hastily, the better to break the current of her thought.

"Those men down there! They are in the hands of a higher fate than we control. I don't know the game" —

"But if" — she broke in.

"But if you gave away the secret, explained it to me, you would throw me back into my darkest chimney to hope no more. Leave it to me; trust me; lean upon me! I assure you that all will be well."

She bent her head and yielded herself to reverie for a moment. Then she sprang to her feet in that indescribably light, graceful way that erased at least fifty of her years from the reckoning, and was herself again.

"Arnold Ames," she said, laughing a little but gazing up at me with unmistakable confidence

and liking in her eyes, "we will go through with this to the end. And whether that slipper really fell at your feet in Beacon Street or in the even less likely precincts of Rittenhouse Square, or

under the windows of the Spanish Embassy in Washington, I believe that you are my good knight, and that you will see me safely through this singular adventure."

And I, Arnold Ames, but lately a student of chimneys, bent and kissed Miss Octavia's hand.

She led the way to the library, where I thought it well to appear for a moment, and I was heartily glad that I did so. It was joy enough for any man that he should have earned such glances of hatred and suspicion as the suitors bent upon me. There they were, some standing, some seated, about Cecilia. I bowed low from the door, feeling that to offer my hand to these gentlemen in their present temper would be too severe a strain upon their manners. As Miss Octavia appeared, several of them advanced courteously and engaged her in conversation. She found a seat and called the others to her, on the plea that she wished to ask them their opinion touching some matter, — I believe it was a late rumor that Andree, who had gone ballooning to discover the Hyperboreans, had been heard of somewhere.

Cecilia appeared distrait, and I wondered what new turn her affairs had taken. She rose as I crossed the room, and from her manner I judged that she welcomed this chance of addressing me.

"You have scorned the library to-night. Has there been trouble? Is Aunt Octavia alarmed about anything?"

I was sure that this inquiry covered some ulterior question. Hartley Wiggins, listening with

a bored air to Miss Octavia's discussion of Andree's fate, glanced in our direction with manifest displeasure in our propinquity. Cecilia Hollister was a beautiful, charming woman of the world, but I felt her spell less to-night. It may be that the presence of Hezekiah's slipper in my inside coat-pocket, pressing rather insistently against my ribs, acted as a counter-irritant. I certainly could not imagine myself possessed of one of Cecilia's slippers! If I had tried my fictitious Beacon Street episode on Cecilia, she would undoubtedly have expressed her scorn of me. The hollisteritis germ, that had heretofore infected me only intermittently, was now exerting its full tonic power. In trying to hold Miss Octavia to her covenants with the lords of romance, I had strengthened my own confidence in their bold emprise. The gravity with which the suitors gave heed to Miss Octavia's ideas on arctic ballooning touched my humor. Cecilia had but to state her perplexity and I would interest myself promptly in her business. If I had been asked that night to enlist in the most hopeless causes I should have done so without a quibble, and died cheerfully under any barricade.

Our time was short; at any moment the suitors might cease covertly glaring at me, drift away from Miss Octavia, and interpose them-

selves between me and the girl on whom they had set their collective hearts.

"You are in difficulty, Miss Cecilia," I said; "please tell me in what way I may serve you."

"I don't know why I should appeal to you" —

"No reason is necessary. I have told you before that you need only to command me. We may be interrupted at any moment. Pray go on."

"I have lost an article of the greatest value to me. It has been taken from my room."

For a moment only I read distrust and suspicion in her eyes as it occurred to her that I had access to every part of the house; but my manner seemed to restore her confidence. And she could not have forgotten that her own father had met her secretly on the roof of a house that was denied him, and that I was perfectly cognizant of the fact.

"I am sure you can be of assistance," she said. "There's something behind this ghost-story; some one has been in and about the house; you believe that?"

"Yes. There has really been a sort of ghost, you know."

She shrugged her shoulders. Cecilia had no patience with ghosts, and we were losing time. My conversation with Cecilia was annoying

Wiggins, as was plain from his nervousness. Wiggins's courtesy was unfailing, but there are points at which the restraints of civilization snap. Cecilia realized that time passed and that she had not stated her difficulty. She now lowered her voice and spoke with great earnestness.

"I went to my room for a moment, while Aunt Octavia was above, with you I suppose, just after the chimney gave another of its strange demonstrations. I remembered that I had left my little silver-bound book, that I usually carry with me, on my dressing-room table. It contains a memorandum of great importance to me. It positively cannot be duplicated. I am sure it was there when I came down to dinner. But it was not on my dressing-table or anywhere to be found."

"You may be mistaken as to where you left it. You would not be absolutely positive that you left it on the dressing-table?"

"There is not the slightest question about it. I had been looking at it just before dinner. I had sent you a note, you know, immediately after you came back, and hurried down to see you."

"Yes. I recall that. You were in the library when I came down. And I think I remember having seen the little trinket, — slightly smaller than a card-case, silver-backed and only a few

leaves. You had it in your hand the other night when I came in after Mr. Hume had left."

She flushed slightly at this, but readily acquiesced in my description. Miss Octavia's inquiry as to whether I had seen the book came back to me; and no less clearly her withdrawal of her question almost the moment she had spoken it.

I felt the sudden impingement of Hezekiah's slipper upon my own conscience, if I may so state the matter. Hezekiah, playing ghost, had confessed to me that she had visited Cecilia's room. Hezekiah, amusing herself with the library chimney and frightening the servants by stealing into the forbidden house through the coal-hole, was a culprit to be scolded and forgiven; but what of Hezekiah mischievously filching an article of real value to her sister! I did not like this turn of affairs. I must get back to the roof, find Hezekiah, and compel her to return the silver book. Only by tactfully managing this could I serve well all the members of the house of Hollister. But first I must leave Cecilia with a tranquil mind.

"I thank you for confiding this matter to me, Miss Hollister. Please do not attach suspicion to any one until I have seen you again."

"But if you should be unable to restore" —

"I assure you that the book is not lost. It has been mislaid, that's all. I shall return it to you at breakfast. I give you my word."

"Do you really mean it?" she faltered. "Please keep this from Aunt Octavia! I can't tell you how important it is that she be kept in ignorance of my loss. The consequences, if she knew, might be very distressing."

I could not for the life of me see what great importance could attach to those few leaves of paper in their silver case, but if Miss Octavia and Hezekiah were interested in it as well as Cecilia, it must have a significance wholly unrelated to its intrinsic value. It is the way of professional detectives to suggest impossible theories merely to conceal their own plans and intentions, and as I had reached a point where my tongue was astonishingly glib in subterfuge and evasion, I suggested that it might perhaps have been one of the new servants, or indeed the Swedish maid.

"We will look into the matter, Miss Hollister. At breakfast I shall have something to report. Meanwhile silence is the word!"

Miss Octavia was carrying the invincible John Stewart Dick away to the billiard-room. He glared at me murderously as he trailed glumly after the lady of the manor. The others were crowding about Cecilia again, and I yielded to

them willingly. As I sauntered toward the door Ormsby detained me a moment. His manner was arrogant and he hissed rather than spoke.

"I'm directed to command your presence at the Prescott Arms to-morrow at twelve o'clock. The business is important."

"I regret, my dear brother, that I shall be unable to sit with you at that hour in committee of the whole, and for two reasons. The first is that I am paired with Lord Arrowood. You refused to take him into your base compact, and allowed him to be thrown out of the inn for not paying his bill. The act was deficient in generosity and gallantry."

"Then I suppose you would think it a fine thing for such a pauper to marry a woman like that, — like that, I say?" and he jerked his head toward Cecilia.

"I consider a lord of Arrowood as good as the proprietor of a knitting-mill any day, if you press me for an opinion," I replied amiably.

"And this from a chimney-sweep?" he sneered.

"You flatter me, my dear sir. I've renounced soot and become a gentleman adventurer merely to prevent a type that long illumined popular fiction from becoming extinct. I advise you to fill the void existing in the heavy-villain class; believe me, your talents would carry you far.

Study Dumas and forget the wool-market, and you will lead a happier life. My second reason for declining to meet you at the Arms at twelve to-morrow is merely that the hour is inconvenient. I assume that you mean to urge luncheon upon me, and I never eat before one. My doctor has warned me to avoid early luncheons if I would preserve my figure, of which you may well believe me justly proud."

"You're a coward, that's all there is to that. I dare you to come!"

"Well, as I think of it I'd rather be dared than invited. If I find it quite convenient I shall drop in. But you need n't keep the waffles hot for me. Good evening."

It did not seem possible that I, the timid, uncombative and unathletic, had thus cavalierly addressed a dignified gentleman in a white waistcoat who was perfectly capable of knocking me down with a slap in the face. Valor, I aver, is only another of the offsprings of necessity.

XVI

JACK O' LANTERN

I HURRIED back to the trunk-room and had soon gained the roof. The moon was harassed by flying clouds that obscured it fitfully, and a keen wind swept the hills. I crept over the several levels of roof thinking that any moment I should come upon Hezekiah; I searched a second time, peering behind chimney-pots, and into dark angles; but to my disappointment and chagrin my young lady of the single slipper was nowhere in sight. I found, however, lying near the library chimney, a trunk-tray that required no explanation. With this Hezekiah had blocked the flue, and I smiled as I pictured her tip-toeing to reach the chimney-crock, and dropping the tray across the top. How gleefully she must have chuckled as she waited for the flue to fill and send the smoke ebbing back into the library, to the discomfiture of her aunt and sister and the suitors gathered about the hearth! The spirit of mischief never whispered into a prettier ear a trick better calculated to cause confusion.

I had thought Hezekiah secure when I locked

the trunk-room door, but I had not counted upon the versatility and resourcefulness of that young person. I dropped to the second roof-level and inspected the down-spouts, but it was incredible that she had sought the earth by this means. I swung myself to a third level, and after much groping for my bearings, decided that an athletic girl of Hezekiah's venturesome disposition might, if she set no great store by her neck, clamber off the kitchen-roof by means of a tall maple whose branches now raspingly called attention to their slight contact with the house. It was here that the walls of Hopefield thrust themselves into the shoulder of a rough rocky knoll, and it was perfectly clear now that the chambers of the earlier house around which the mansion had been built were neatly enfolded by the walls on the east side.

As the moon cruised into a patch of clear sky something white fluttered from a maple limb, and I bent and pulled it free. I took counsel of a match behind the kitchen chimney, and found that it was a handkerchief that had been knotted to the tip of the bough. No one but Hezekiah would have thought of marking her trail in this fashion. I held it to my face, and that faint perfume that had been a mystifying accompaniment of the passing of the mansion ghost became

nothing more unreal than the orris in Hezekiah's handkerchief-case. The wind whipped the bit of linen spitefully in my hands. I reasoned that if Hezekiah the inexplicable had not meant for me to know the manner of her exit she need not have left this plain hint behind; but the swaying maple bough did not tempt me. I hurried back across the roof to secure the trunk-tray, resolved to dispose of it, seek the open, and find the errant Hezekiah if she still lingered in the neighborhood.

I looked off across the windy landscape before descending, and as my eyes ranged the dark I caught the glimmer of a light, as of a lantern borne in the hand, in the meadow beyond the garden. It paused, and was swung back and forth by its unseen bearer. It shed a curious yellow light and not the white flame of the common lantern; and now it rose a trifle higher and slowly resolved itself into a weird fantastic face.

Three minutes later I was out of the house, using the backstairs to avoid the company in the library, and had crossed the garden and crawled through the hedge. As I rose to my feet a voice greeted me cheerfully,—

"Well done, Chimney-Man! You were a little slow hitting the trail, but you do pretty well, considering. How did you manage with Aunt Octavia about that slipper? I had a narrow

escape in the second-floor hall, when I came out of Cecilia's room. I must have lowered a record getting upstairs. And one shoe is n't a bit comfortable. Allow me to relieve you!"

"Here's your slipper. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"For losing my slipper? I thought Cinderella had made that respectable."

She placed her hand on my shoulder, lifted her foot, and drew the pump on with a single tug.

"Well, what did Aunt Octavia say?"

"Oh, she had thoughts too dark to express. You probably heard what we said. It was she who found the slipper!"

Hezekiah laughed. The wind caught up that laugh and whisked it away jealously.

"She found it and carried it to you, Chimney-Man, and I skipped just as you began that beautiful story about finding it in Beacon Street. Hurry and tell me how you got me out of it."

"How did you know I would try to explain it? You did a perfectly foolhardy thing in roaming the house that way, scaring Lord Arrowood nearly to death, to say nothing of me. Why should I help you?"

"Oh, you're a man and I was just a little girl who had lost her slipper," she replied. "I was sure you would fix it up."

"Well, I like your nerve, Hezekiah! I had to lie horribly to explain the slipper, and Miss Octavia did n't swallow more than half my yarn."

"Oh, well, if it was a good story, Aunt Octavia would n't mind. She'd have minded, though, if you had n't tried to get me out of it. That's the way with Aunt Octavia. I hope you made a romantic tale of it."

"I can't say that it would place me among the great masters of fiction, Hezekiah, but as lies go I think it had merit. And I'll improve if I stay here much longer."

"Oh, you'll stay all right. Aunt Octavia has no intention of letting you go. When she left the Asolando that afternoon she met you, she had her plans all made for kidnapping you."

"She did n't tell you so, did she?"

"No; because I have n't seen her and I'm not supposed to see her, you know, until Cecilia is all fixed."

"Married?"

"Um," replied Hezekiah.

She drew from behind a boulder by which we stood a pumpkin of portable size, which I surmised had been carved into the most hideous of jack o' lanterns by the shrewd hand of Hezekiah. I took it from her with the excuse of relieving her, but really to turn the light of the fearsome

thing more directly upon her. The wind blew her hair about her face; hers was an elfish face to-night. With a pleasant tingling I met her eyes. The light of a jack o' lantern is not of the earth earthy. Even when you know perfectly well that it's only a candle stuck in a pumpkin, you are not fully satisfied of its mundane character. In its glow one becomes a conspirator, ready for treason, stratagems and spoils. More concretely, in these moments a small archipelago of freckles revealed itself about Hezekiah's nose and caused my heart to palpitate strangely. Her sunbrowned cheek was perilously near. I hoped that she would bend forever over the lantern, so that I might not lose the tiny shadows of her lashes, or, again, the laughter of her brown eyes as she glanced up to ask my judgment as to the security of the candle. She viewed her handiwork with feigned solicitude, the tip of her tongue showing between her lips. Then the mirth in her bubbled out, and she drew away and clapped her hands together like a child.

"Come!" she cried. "If you are good and won't begin preaching about my sins, I'll show you the funniest thing you ever saw in your life."

In my joy of seeing her I was neglecting Cecilia's commission. Very likely Hezekiah had forgotten all about her theft; hers, I reasoned, was a

nature that delighted in the nearest pleasure. I would follow her jack o' lantern round the world for the chance of seeing the fun brighten in her brown eyes, but I had made a promise to Cecilia and I meant to fulfill it.

She led me now across the meadow, over a stone wall, up a steep slope, and by devious ways through a strip of woodland. I bore the jack o' lantern, — she had bidden me do it, with some notion, I did not question, of making me *particeps criminis* in whatever mischief was afoot. Dignified conduct in a man of twenty-eight, in his best evening clothes, carrying a jack o' lantern over stone walls, under clumps of briar, and through woods whose boughs clawed the night wildly! The moon lost and found under the flying scud was in keeping with the general irresponsibility of a world ruled by Hezekiah.

She swung along ahead of me with the greatest ease and certainty. Occasionally she flung some word back at me or whistled a few bars of a tune, and when I slipped and nearly fell on a smooth slope she laughed mockingly and bade me not lose the pumpkin. Once, when a boy, I stole a watermelon and bore it a mile to the rendezvous of my pirate band camped at a riverside; but carrying a pumpkin, even a hollow one, is attended with manifold discomforts. It would

help, I reflected, to know just what I was lugging it for, but Hezekiah vouchsafed nothing. When I threatened to drop the grinning gargoyle she laughed and told me to trot along and not be silly; and a moment later she stopped and demanded that I repeat fully the story I had told her aunt of the finding of the slipper.

"You are better than I thought you were, Chimney-Man!" she declared, when I had concluded and added her aunt's comment. "You may be sure that tickled Aunt Octavia. You can lie almost as well as an architect. Aunt Octavia says architects are better liars than dressmakers."

"It was my weakness for the truth that caused me to abandon architecture. For heaven's sake, what are you up to?"

I had kept little account of the direction of our flight, and I was surprised that we had now reached the stile over which I had watched the passing of the suitors on the afternoon of my meeting with Hezekiah in the orchard.

"This is the appointed place," she remarked, taking the pumpkin from me and dropping down on the far side of the stile.

"Hezekiah, I've trotted across most of Westchester County after you, and my arm is paralyzed from carrying that pumpkin. I must know

what you're up to right here, or I'll go home. Besides, there's a mist falling and you'll be soaked. What do you suppose your father thinks of your absence at this time of night?"

"Oh, he'll never forgive me for not letting him in on this. This is the grandest thing I ever thought of. Sit on this step and gently incline your ear toward the house. It's about time those gentlemen were leaving Cecilia, and they'll be galloping for their inn in a minute, and then" —

Hezekiah whistled the rest of it.

While we waited, she bade me reset the candle and snuff the wick, which I did of necessity with my fingers. Sitting on a stile with a pretty girl is an experience that has been commended by the balladists, but surely this felicity loses nothing where the night is fine. When you get used to sitting in a drizzle in your dress-suit, while your shirt-bosom assumes the consistency of a gum shoe and your collar glues itself odiously to your neck, I dare say the ordeal may be borne cheerfully, but my expressions of discomfort seemed only to amuse Hezekiah. While we waited for I knew not what, I tried once or twice to revert to the silver note-book, but without success. Hezekiah was a mistress of the art of evasion with her tongue as well as her feet!

"Wait till the evening performance is over and

I'll talk about that. 'Sh! Quiet! Crawl over there out of the way, and when I say run, beat it for the road."

These last phrases were uttered in a whisper, her face close to my ear. She gave me a little push, and I withdrew a few yards and waited. The ground, I may say, was wet, and the drizzle had become a monotonous autumn rain.

The light of the lantern fell warmly upon Hezekiah's face as she held its illumined countenance toward her, crouching on the stile-steps. I heard now what her keener ear had caught earlier — the tramp of feet along the path. The suitors were returning to the inn, and the voices of one or two of them reached me. One — I thought it was Ormsby — was execrating the weather. They were stepping along briskly, and my remembrance of their retreat over this same stile through the amber evening dusk was so vivid that I knew just how they would appear if a light suddenly fell upon the path.

The nature of Hezekiah's undertaking suddenly dawned upon me. No one but Hezekiah could ever have devised anything so preposterous, so utterly lawless; but in spite of myself I waited in breathless eagerness for the outcome. I could not have interfered now, if I had wished to do so, without betraying her and involving

myself in a predicament that could not redound to my credit.

Nearer and nearer came the patter of feet, and

I heard, for I could not see, the scraping of Hezekiah's slipper, — a wet little shoe by now! — as she crept higher on our side of the stile. The first suitor groped blindly for the steps, slipped on the

wet plank, growled, and rose to try again. That growl marked for me the leader of the van. Hartley Wiggins, beyond a doubt, and in no good humor, I guessed! The others, I judged, had trodden upon one another's heels at the moment Wiggins stumbled. Thus let us imagine their approach — six gentlemen in top hats headed for a stile on a chilly night of rain.

It was at this strategic moment that Hezekiah pushed into the middle of the stile-platform, its grinning face turned toward the advancing suitors, the jack o' lantern her hand had fashioned.

I marked its position by its faint glow an instant, but an instant only. The world reeled for a moment before the sharp cry of a man in fear. It cut the dark like a lash, and close upon it the second man yelled, in a different key, but no less in accents of terror. The first arrival had flung himself back, and so close upon him pressed the others and so unexpected was the halt, that the six men seemed to have flung themselves together and to be struggling to escape from the hideous thing that had interposed itself in their path.

All was over in a moment. In the midst of the panic the lantern winked out, and instantly Hezekiah was beside me.

"Skip!" she commanded in a whisper; and

catching my sleeve she led me off at a brisk run. When we had gone a dozen rods she paused. We heard voices from the stile, where the gentlemen were still engaged in disentangling themselves; and then the planks boomed to their steps as they crossed. They talked loudly among themselves discussing the cause of their discomfiture. The lantern, I may add, had been knocked off the stile by the thoughtful Hezekiah when she blew out the light.

A moment more and all sounds of the suitors had died away. I stood alone with Hezekiah in the midst of a meadow. She was breathing hard. Suddenly she threw up her head, struck her hands together, and stamped her foot upon the wet sod. I had waited for an outburst of laughter now that we were safely out of the way, but I had reasoned without my Hezekiah. Her mood was not the mood of mirth.

"Well, Hezekiah," I said when I had got my wind, "you pulled off your joke, but you don't seem to be enjoying it. What's the matter?"

"Oh, that Hartley Wiggins! I might have known it!"

"Known what?" I asked, pricking up my ears.

"That he would be afraid of a pumpkin with a candle inside of it. Did you hear that yell?"

"Anybody would have yelled," I suggested.

"I think I should have dropped dead if you'd tried it on me."

"No, you would n't," she asserted with unexpected flattery.

"Don't be deceived, Hezekiah; I should have been scared to death if that thing had popped up in front of me."

"I don't believe it. I gave you a worse test than that. When I switched off the lights and swung a feather duster down the stair-well by a string and tickled your face you did n't make a noise like a circus calliope scaring horses in Main Street, Podunk. But that Wiggins man!"

"He's a friend of mine and as brave as a lion. Out in Dakota the sheriff used to get him to go in and quiet things when the boys were shooting up the town."

"Maybe; but he shied at a pumpkin and can be no true knight of mine. Cecilia may have him. I always suspected that he was n't the real thing. Why, he's even afraid of Aunt Octavia!"

"Well, I rather think *we 'd* better be!"

I wanted to laugh, but I did not dare. I was not prepared for the humor in which the panic of the suitors had left her. I did not quite make out — and I am uncertain to this day — whether she had really wished to test the courage of her sister's lovers or whether she had yielded to a mis-

chievous impulse in carrying the jack o' lantern to the stile and thrusting it before those serious-minded gentlemen as they returned from Hopefield. In any event Hartley Wiggins was out of it so far as she, Hezekiah, was concerned. She trudged doggedly across the field until we came presently to the highway.

"My wheel 's in the weeds somewhere; please pull it out for me. I'm going home."

"But not alone; I can't let you do that, Hezekiah."

"Oh, cheer up!" she laughed, aroused by my lugubrious tone. "And here's something you asked me for. Don't drop it. It's Cecilia's memorandum-book. Give it back to her, and be sure no one sees it, and you need n't look into it yourself. And we've got to have a talk about it and Cecilia. Let me see. There's an iron bridge across an arm of that little lake over there, and just beyond it a big fallen tree. To-morrow at nine o'clock I'll be there. I've got to tell you something, Chimney-Man, without really telling you. You'll be there, won't you?"

"I'll be there if I'm alive, Hezekiah."

I had found the wheel and lighted the lamp. She scouted my suggestion that I find a horse and drive her home. The lighting of the lamp required time owing to the wind and rain; but

when its thin ribbon of light fell clearly upon the road, she seized the handle-bars and was ready to mount without ado.

She gave me her hand, — it was a cold, wet little hand, but there was a good friendly grip in it. This was the first time I had touched Hezekiah's hand, and I mention it because as I write I feel again the pressure of her slim cold fingers.

"Sorry you spoiled your clothes, but it was in a good cause. And you're a nice boy, Chimney-Man!"

She shot away into the darkness, and the lamp's glow on the road vanished in an instant; but before I lost her quite, her cheery whistle blew back to me reassuringly.

XVII

SEVEN GOLD REEDS

I WOKE the next morning to the banging of Miss Octavia's fowling-piece. In spite of the crowding incidents of the day and night I had slept soundly, and save for a stiffness of the legs I was none the worse for my wetting. The service of the house was perfect, and in response to my ring a man appeared who declared himself competent to knock my dress clothes into shape again.

I should hardly have believed that so much history had been made in a night, if it had not been for certain indubitable evidence: Cecilia's silver note-book; Hezekiah's handkerchief, which I had forgotten to return to her; and a patch of tallow grease from the jack o' lantern that had attached itself firmly to my coat-cuff.

Cecilia met me at the foot of the stairs, looking rather worn, I thought. We were safe from interruption a moment longer, as her aunt's gun was still booming, and I followed her to the library.

"Please don't tell me you have failed," she

cried tearfully. "That little book means so much, so very much to us all!"

"Here it is, Miss Hollister," I said, placing it in her hand without parley. "I beg to assure you that I return it just as you saw it last. Please satisfy yourself that it has not been tampered with in any way. I have not opened it; and it has not left my hand since I recovered it."

She had almost snatched it from me, and she turned slightly away and ran hurriedly over the leaves.

In her relief she laughed happily; and with one of her charming, graceful gestures she gave me her hand.

"I thank you, Mr. Ames; thank you! thank you! You have rendered me the greatest service. And I hope you were able to do so without serious inconvenience to yourself."

"On the other hand it was the smallest matter, and instead of being a trouble I found the greatest pleasure in recovering it."

I stood with my hands thrust carelessly into my trousers pockets, rocking slightly upon my heels to convey a sense of the unimportance of my service. It was a manner I had cultivated to meet the surprise and gratitude of my clients when I had brought a seemingly incurable flue into a state of subjection. I think I may have

appeared a little bored, as though I had accomplished a feat that was rather unworthy of my powers. A doctor who prescribes the wrong pill and finds to his amazement that it cures the patient, might improve upon that manner, but not greatly.

"You naturally wonder, Miss Hollister, how I found this trinket so readily. And in order that you may not suspect perfectly innocent persons, I will tell you exactly how I came by it. It was your belief that you had left it on your dressing-table. But as a memorandum-book of any character pertains to a writing-desk rather than to a dressing-table, my interest centred at once upon such writing-table as you doubtless have in your room."

"There is a writing-desk, in the corner by the window, but" —

"Ah, you are about to repeat your belief that you left the book on the dressing-table and that it could not have moved to the desk. May I ask whether you did not, just before you came down to dinner, scribble me a line asking for an interview?"

"Why, yes; I remember that perfectly."

"You wrote in some haste, as indicated by the handwriting in your message. It is possible that you wrote and destroyed one note, or perhaps

two, before you had expressed yourself exactly to your liking. We are all of us, with any sort of feeling for style, prone to just such rejections."

"It is possible that I did," she replied, coloring slightly. "I was extremely anxious to see you."

"Very well, then; is it not possible that in throwing the rejected correspondence cards into the waste-paper basket that stands beside your desk, — there is such a basket, is there not?"

"Yes," she replied breathlessly.

"Is it not possible, then, that that little booklet, hardly heavier than paper itself, may have been brushed off without your seeing it?"

"It is possible; I must admit that it is possible; but" —

"It is on that 'but' that any theory implicating another hand must break. What I have indicated is exactly what must have happened. To the nice care that characterizes the house-keeping of this establishment we must now turn. I find that when I go to my own room after dinner it is always in perfect order, — pens restored to the rack on my writing-table, brushes laid straight on the dressing-table, and so on. The well-trained maid who cares for your room, seeing scraps of paper in the basket by your desk,

naturally carried it off. When I accepted your commission last night I went directly to the cellar, sought the bin into which waste paper is thrown, and found among old envelopes and other litter this small trinket, which but for my promptness might have been lost forever."

"It does n't seem possible," she faltered.

"Oh," I laughed easily, "possible or impossible, you could not on the witness-stand swear that the book had not dropped into the waste-paper basket precisely as I have described."

"No, I suppose I could n't," she answered slowly.

My powers of mendacity were improving; but her relief at holding the book again in her hand was so great that she would probably have believed anything.

"You see," she said, clasping the book tight, "this was given me for a particular purpose and it contains a memorandum of greatest importance. And I was in a panic when I found that it was gone, for my recollection of certain items I had recorded here was confused, and there was no possible way of setting myself straight. Now all is clear again. I feel that I make poor acknowledgment of your service; but if, at any time" —

"Pray think no more of it," I replied; and at

this moment Miss Hollister appeared and called us to breakfast.

"If it is perfectly agreeable to you, Arnold, I will hear the story of the finding of the ghost at four o'clock, or just before tea. I have sent a telegram to Mr. Pepperton asking him to be present. He 's at his country home in Redding and can very easily motor down. As no motors are allowed on my premises he shall be met at the gate with a trap."

"You have sent for Pepperton!" I exclaimed.

"That is exactly what I have done, and as he knows that I never accept apologies under any circumstances, he will not disappoint me. In addition to reprimanding him for not telling me of the secret passage in this house, I have another matter that concerns you, Arnold, which I wish to lay before him. The new cook that Providence sent to my kitchen yesterday is the best we have had, Cecilia, and I beg that you both indulge yourselves in a second helping of country scrambled eggs."

Miss Octavia made no further allusion to the incidents of the night, but went on turning over her mail. I have neglected to say that her library contained a most remarkable array of books in praise of man's fortitude and daring. I have learned later that these had been assembled for

her by a distinguished scholar, and many of them were rare editions. A "Karlamagnus Saga" elbowed Malory and the "Reali di Francia;" and Roland's horn challenged in all languages. She greatly admired and had often visited the Château de Luynes, and had a portfolio filled with water-color and pen-and-ink drawings of it. Such books as Viollet-le-Duc's "Dictionnaire du Mobilier Français" I constantly found lying spread open on the library table. She read German and French readily, and declared her purpose to attack old French that she might pursue certain obscure *chansons de geste* which, an Oxford professor had told her, were not susceptible of adequate translation. Why should one read the news of the day when the news of all time was available! Magazines and reviews she tolerated, but no newspaper was as good as Froissart. She therefore read newspapers only through a clipping bureau, which sent her items bearing upon her own peculiar interests. By some error the story of a heavy embezzlement in a city bank had that day crept in among a number of cuttings relating to a ship that had been found somewhere off the Chilean coast with all sails set and everything in perfect order, but with not a soul on board. She expressed her bitterest contempt for men in responsible positions who betrayed

their trusts: highway robbery she thought a much nobler crime, as the robber dignified his act by exposing himself to personal danger.

"In our day, Arnold," she said, placing her knife and fork carefully on her plate, "in our day the ten commandments have lost their moral significance and retain, I fear, only a very slight literary interest."

She reminded Cecilia of an appointment to ride that morning; in the early afternoon she was to install a new kennel-master; and otherwise there was a full day ahead of her. It was a cheerful breakfast table. A letter from my assistant confirming his telegraphed resignation did not disturb me; Miss Octavia showed no further signs of abandoning her quest of the golden coasts of youth, and Cecilia, having recovered her notebook, faced the new day cheerfully.

A little later I met Miss Hollister in the hall dressed for her ride.

"Arnold, you may ride whenever you like. I may have forgotten to mention it. What have you on hand this morning?"

"An appointment with a lady," I replied.

"If you are about to meet the owner of that Beacon Street slipper I wish you good luck."

She was drawing on her gauntlets, and turned

away to hide a smile, I thought; then she tapped me lightly with her riding-crop.

"Cecilia's silver note-book was missing last night. She told me of her loss with tears. She has it again this morning. Did you restore it?"

"It was my good fortune to do so."

"Then allow me to add my thanks to hers. You are an unusually practical person, Arnold Ames, as well as the possessor of an imagination that pleases me. You are becoming more and more essential to me. Cecilia approaches, and I cannot say more at this time."

When they had ridden out of the porte-cochère I set off across the fields to keep my tryst with Hezekiah. The air had been washed sweet and clean by the rain of the night, and sky was never bluer. I was surprised at my own increasing detachment from the world. Nothing that had happened before the Asolando mattered greatly; my meeting with Miss Octavia Hollister had marked a climacteric from which all events must now be reckoned. I had embarked with high hope in a profession to which I had been drawn from youth, had failed utterly to find clients, and had therefore taken up the doctoring of flues, a vocation whose honors are few and dubious, and in which I felt it to be

damning praise that I was called the best in America. My days at Hopefield were the happiest of my life. Few as they had been, they had changed my gray bleak course into a path bright with promise. The world had been too much with me, and I had escaped from it as completely as though I had stepped upon another planet "where all is possible and all unknown."

I reached the fallen tree that Hezekiah had appointed as our trysting-place a little ahead of time, and indulged in pleasant speculations while I waited. I was looking toward the hills expecting her to come skimming along the highway on her bicycle, when a splash caused me to turn to the lake. Dull of me not to have known that Hezekiah would contrive a new entrance for a scene so charmingly set as this! She had stolen upon me in a light skiff, and laughed to see how her silent approach startled me. She dropped one oar and used the other as a paddle, driving the boat with a sure hand through the reeds into the bank.

"'T is morning and the days are long!"

Such was Hezekiah's greeting as she jumped ashore. She wore a dark green skirt and coat, and a narrow four-in-hand cravat tied under a flannel collar that clasped her throat snugly. A

boy's felt hat, with the brim pinned up in front, covered her head.

"You seem none the worse for your wetting, Hezekiah. You must have been soaked."

"So must you, Chimneys, but you look as fit as I feel, and I never felt better. Did they catch you crawling in last night?"

"I did n't see a soul. You know I'm an old member of the family now. Nobody was ever as nice to me as your Aunt Octavia."

"How about Cecilia?"

"Having found her silver note-book and given it back to her before breakfast, I may say that our relations are altogether cordial."

"Are you in love with her — yet?" asked Hezekiah, carelessly, tossing a pebble into the lake. The "yet" was so timed that it splashed with the pebble.

"No; not — yet," I replied.

"It will come," said Hezekiah a little ruefully, casting a pebble farther upon the crinkled water.

"You mean, Hezekiah, that men always fall in love with your sister."

She nodded.

"Well, she's a good deal of a girl."

"Beautiful and no end cultivated. They all go crazy about her."

"You mean Hartley Wiggins and his fellow-bandits at the Prescott Arms."

"Yes; and lots of others."

"And sometimes, Hezekiah, it has seemed to you that she got all the admiration, and that you did n't get your share. So when her suitors began a siege of the castle whose gates were locked against you, you plugged the chimney with a trunk-tray, and played at being ghost and otherwise sought to terrify your sister's lovers."

"That 's not nice, Chimneys. You mean that I'm jealous."

"No. I don't mean that you are jealous now: I throw it into the remote and irrevocable past. You *were* jealous. You don't care so much now. And I hope you will care less!"

"That is being impertinent. If you talk that way I shall call you Mr. Ames and go home!"

"You can't do that, Hezekiah."

"I should like to know why not? If you say I'm jealous of Cecilia now, or that I ever was, I shall be very, very angry. For it's not true."

"No. You see things very differently now. You told me only last night that Cecilia might have Hartley Wiggins. Assuming that she wants him! And you and he have been good friends, have n't you? You had good times on the other side. And while Cecilia was in town assisting

Providence in finding your aunt a cook, you went walking with him."

"I did, I did!" mocked Hezekiah. "And why do you suppose I did?"

"Because Wiggy 's the best of fellows; a solid, substantial citizen, who raises wheat to make bread out of."

"And angel food and ginger cookies," added Hezekiah, feeling absently in the pockets of her coat. "No, Chimneys, you 're a nice boy and you don't yell like a wild man when a feather-duster hits you in the dark; but there are some things you don't know yet."

"I am here to grow wise at the feet of Hezekiah, Daughter of Kings. Open the book of wisdom and teach me the alphabet, but don't be sad if I balk at the grammar."

"I never knew all the alphabet myself," said Hezekiah dolefully; then she laughed abruptly. "I was bounced from two convents and no end of Hudson River and Fifth Avenue education shops."

"The brutality of that, Hezekiah, wrings my heart! Yet you are the best teacher I ever had, and I thought I was educated when I met you. But I had only been to school, which is different. Not until the first time our eyes met, not until that supreme moment" —

"Mr. Ames," Hezekiah interrupted, in the happiest possible imitation of Miss Octavia's manner, "if you think that, because I am a poor lone girl who knows nothing of the great, wide world, I am a fair mark for your cajolery, I assure you that you were never more mistaken in your life!"

"You ought n't to mimic your aunt. It is n't respectful; and besides you have something to tell me. What 's all this rumpus about Cecilia's silver memorandum-book? Suppose we discuss that and get through with it."

We were sitting on the fallen tree, which lay partly in the lake, and Hezekiah leaned over and broke off a number of reeds from the thicket at the water's edge. Out of her pocket she drew a small penknife and trimmed them uniformly.

"You see," she began, biting her lip in the earnestness of her labor, "I'm going to tell you something, and yet I'm not going to tell you. So far as you and I have gone you've been tolerably satisfactory. If I did n't think you had some wits in your head I should n't have bothered with you at all. That's frank, is n't it?"

"It certainly is. But I'm terribly fussed for fear I may not be equal to this new ordeal."

"If you fail we shall never meet again; that's all there is to that. Now listen real hard. You know something about it already, but not the

main point. Aunt Octavia got father to consent to let her marry us off — Cecilia and me. Cecilia, being older, came first. I was to keep out of the way, and father and I were not to come to Aunt Octavia's new house up there or meddle in any way. While we were abroad I was treated as a little girl, and not as a grown-up at all. But you see I'm really nineteen, and some of Cecilia's suitors were nice to me when we were traveling. They were nice to me on Cecilia's account, you know."

"Of course. You 're so hard to look at, it must have been painful to them to be nice to you, — almost like taking poison! Go on, Hezekiah!"

"You need n't interrupt me like that. Well, as part of the understanding, and Cecilia agreed to it, — she thought she had to for papa's sake, — she was to marry a particular man. Do you understand me, a particular man? Aunt Octavia gave her the little note-book — she bought it at a shop in Paris at the time Cecilia consented to the plan — and she was to keep a sort of diary, so that she'd know when the right man turned up. Now we will drop the note-book for a minute; only I'll say that Cecilia was to keep the book all to herself and not show it to any one, not even to Aunt Octavia, you know, until

the right man had asked Cecilia to marry him. Now who do you suppose, Mr. Ames, that man is?"

I watched her hands as they deftly cut and fashioned the dry reeds. The air grew warm as the sun climbed to the zenith, and Hezekiah flung aside her coat. The breeze caught the ends of her tie and snapped them behind her. She was wholly absorbed in her task, and no boy could have managed a pocket-knife better. The first reed she made a trifle longer than her hand; the succeeding ones she trimmed to graduated lessening lengths, till seven in all had been cut, and then she notched them.

"Seven," she murmured, laying them neatly in order on her knee. "I remember the right number by a poem I read the other day in an old magazine."

She reached down and plucked several long leaves of tough grass with which she began to bind the reeds together, repeating, —

> "Seven gold reeds grew tall and slim,
> Close by the river's beaded brim.
> "Syrnix the naiad flitted past:
> Pan, the goat-hoofed, followed fast.

"It will be easier," said Hezekiah, "if you hold the pipes while I tie them."

I found this propinquity wholly agreeable. It

was pleasant to sit on a log beside Hezekiah. It seemed no far cry to the storied Mediterranean and Pan and dryads and naiads, as Hezekiah bound her reeds to the music of couplets. There was no self-consciousness in her recitation; she seemed to be telling me of something that she had seen herself an hour ago.

> "He spread his arms to clasp her there
> Just as she vanished into air.
>
> "And to his bosom warm and rough
> Drew the gold reeds close enough.

"I don't remember the rest," she broke off. "But there! That's a pipe fit for any shepherd."

She put it to her lips and blew. I shall not pretend that the result was melodious: she whistled much better without the reeds; but the sight of her, sitting on the fallen tree beside the lake, beating time with her foot, her head thrown back, her eyes half-closed in a mockery of rapture at the shrill, wheezy uncertainties and ineptitudes she evoked, thrilled me with new and wonderful longings. A heart, a spirit like hers would never grow old! She was next of kin to all the elusive, fugitive company of the elf-world. And on such a pipe as she had strung together beside that pond, to this day Sicilian shepherd boys whistle themselves into tune with Theocritus!

"Take it," she said; "I can't tell you more than I have; and yet it is all there, Chimneys. Read the riddle of the reeds if you can."

I took the pipe and turned it over carefully in my hands; but I fear my thoughts were rather of the hands that had fashioned it, the fingers that had danced nimbly upon the stops.

"There are seven reeds, — seven," she affirmed.

She amused herself by skipping pebbles over the surface of the water while I pondered. And I deliberated long, for one did not like to blunder before Hezekiah! Then I jumped up and called to her.

"One, two, three, four, five, six — seven! Not until the seventh man offers himself shall Cecilia have a husband! Is that the answer?"

For a moment Hezekiah watched the widening ripples made by the casting of her last pebble; then she came back and resumed her seat.

"You have done well, Chimney Man; and now I'll not make you guess any more, though I found it all out for myself. When Aunt Octavia gave that memorandum-book to Cecilia, I knew it must have something to do with the seventh man. You know I love all Aunt Octavia's nonsense because it's the kind of foolishness I like myself, and the idea of a pretty little note-book to write down proposals in was precisely the sort of thing that would have occurred to my aunt. And it was in the bargain, too, that she herself should not in any way interfere, or try to influence the course of events: it should be the seventh suitor, willy-nilly. And I suspect she's been a little scared too."

"She has indeed! She was almost ready to throw the whole scheme over last night. Your naughtiness had got on her nerves."

"You missed the target that time: Aunt Octavia loves my naughtiness, and I think she has really been afraid Sir Pumpkin Wiggins would catch me. Now I did n't roam my aunt's house just for fun. I was doing my best to keep Cecilia from getting into some scrape about that seventh-suitor plan. I found out by chance how to get into Hopefield, and about the hidden stairway and the old rooms tucked away there. Papa really discovered that. A carpenter in Katonah who worked on the house helped to build papa's bungalow, and he told us how that ruin came to be there. That dyspepsia-cure man, who also immortalized himself by inventing the ribless umbrella, was very superstitious. He believed that if he built an entirely new house he would die. So he had his architect build around and retain those two rooms and that stairway of a house that had been on the ground almost since the Revolution. Mr. Pepperton, the architect, humored him, but hid the remains of the relic as far out of sight as possible."

"Trust Pep for that! And he did it neatly!"

"Yes; but it did n't save the umbrella-man; he died anyhow; or maybe his pies killed him. Papa

was so curious about it that he took me with him one night just before Aunt Octavia moved here, and he and I found the rooms and the stair and the secret spring by which, if you know just where to poke the wall in the fourth-floor hall, you can disappear as mysteriously as you please."

"But how on earth did you darken the halls so easily? You nearly gave me heart-disease doing that!"

"Oh, that was a mere matter of a young lady in haste! When I found how easily I could pass you on the stair it became a fascinating game, and it was no end of fun to see just how long it would take you to catch me."

"I wish, Hezekiah, that you would stay caught!"

"Be very, very careful, sir! We're talking business now. There's another ordeal for you before you dare become sentimental."

"Then hasten; let us be after it."

"Things are in a serious predicament, I can tell you. I was frightened when I looked into that note-book, — I did n't like to do that, but I had to assist Providence a little. Five men have already got their quietus."

"Then why don't they clear out, and stop their nonsense?"

"Oh, it's their pride, I suppose; and every man probably thinks that when Cecilia has seen a little more of him in particular, in contrast with the others, he will win her favor. They're afraid of one another, those men; that's the reason they've been herding together so close since that first day you came. Mr. Wiggins was taking it for granted that he was the whole thing — just like the man! — and those others forced him to join in some sort of arrangement by which they were to hang together. These calls in a bunch came from that, as though any one of them would n't take advantage of the others if he saw a chance! Some of this I got from Wiggy himself, the rest I just guessed."

"But you may not know that they sent a delegation after me into town, to warn me off the grass."

"That was Mr. Dick. He never saw me when Cecilia was around. And he was terribly snippy sometimes, and supercilious; but I'm going to get even with him. I've about underlined him for number six," she concluded, with the manner of a queen who, about to give her chief executioner his orders for the day, glances calmly over the list of victims.

"That's a good idea; Dick is insufferable; I hope you have n't counted wrong."

"As we were saying, about the note-book," she resumed, "the fifth man has already been respectfully declined. The dates of the proposals are written in the note-book; so I learned from the book that Mr. Ormsby, Mr. Arbuthnot, and Mr. Gorse had proposed on the steamer. Professor Hume, as you know, tried his luck at Hopefield; and Lord Arrowood must have stopped Cecilia as she was riding to the station on my bicycle yesterday morning. His goose is cooked."

"His gooseberry pie was cooked, but I took it away from him. No pie sacred to Hezekiah can be confiscated by an indigent lord so long as I keep my present health and spirits. It's the close season for lords in Westchester County; I potted the last one. By the way, he thought you were a real ghost when you were playing tag with him in the dark."

"He stopped to tell papa good-bye and spoke very highly of you; papa and you are the only gentlemen he met in America. But now we come to Mr. Wiggins."

"We do; and why in the name of all that is beautiful and good has n't he tried his luck?"

"Because, knowing Cecilia's admiration for him," replied Hezekiah demurely, "I have kept him so diverted that he has n't been able to bring himself to the scratch."

She examined the palm of her hand critically to allow me time to grasp this.

"You did n't want him to blunder in as the first, fourth, or sixth man?"

Hezekiah gravely nodded her pretty head.

"And while you were engaged in this sisterly labor, Cecilia has been afraid that you were seriously interested in him!"

"That is like Cecilia. She's fine, and would n't cause me trouble for anything;" and there was no doubt of Hezekiah's sincerity.

"But now that I see the light and understand all this, how can we make sure that Wiggy will be on the spot at the right moment? While we sit here, he may be the sixth man! There's my friend, the eminent thinker from Nebraska; he's likely to kneel before Cecilia at any moment, and Henderson and Shallenberger are not asleep."

"That's all true; and you've got to fix it."

"You're leaving the fate of Wiggins and your sister in my hands? That's a heavy responsibility, Hezekiah. I might take care of Wiggy by asking Cecilia to marry me, being careful to have him appear johnny-on-the-spot when I had been duly declined."

"Um, I should n't take any chances if I were you," she replied, feigning to look at an imaginary bird in a tree-top; "for if you had counted

wrong and were really the seventh man, she would have to accept you!"

"Hezekiah!"

"Oh, I really did n't mean what you thought I meant. We don't need to discuss it any more. That's the ordeal I've arranged for you," she answered, and set her lips sternly.

"But, my dear Hezekiah, by what means can this be effected? I don't dare tell him the combination he's playing against or sit on him until his hour strikes."

"Certainly not; you must n't tell him or anybody else. You know the plan; but you're not supposed to; and nobody must know I've meddled. Meanwhile, Cecilia must expose herself to proposals at all times. Aunt Octavia's heart would be broken if she thought Providence had been tampered with. She likes Wiggy well enough, except that his ancestors were all Tories and he can't be a son of the Revolution."

"Too bad; it was very careless of him not to do better about his ancestors; but he can't change that now."

"Well, you've behaved with considerable intelligence so far, and now with your friend's fate in your hands you will need to use great judgment and tact in all that follows. I wash my hands of the whole business."

She rose quickly and pointed to her coat.

"Drop it into the boat for me, Chimneys. We meet in funny places, don't we? Papa expects me for luncheon, and I must row back and get my bicycle. You? No, you can't go along; you've got a lot of thinking to do, and you'd better be doing it."

XVIII

TROUBLE AT THE PRESCOTT ARMS

A FEW minutes later, as I swung along the highway toward the Prescott Arms, I saw Cecilia Hollister riding toward me at a lively gallop. She crossed the bridge without checking her horse, and then, with a hurried glance over her shoulder, she pointed with her crop to a by-way that led deviously into a strip of forest and vanished.

I hurried after her, and found her waiting for me in a quiet lane. She had dismounted and seemed greatly disturbed as I addressed her. Her horse, a superb Estabrook thoroughbred, had evidently been pushed hard. Cecilia had taken off her hat, and was giving a touch to the wayward strands of hair that had been shaken loose in her flight. The color glowed in her dark cheeks, and her eyes were bright with excitement.

"I had n't expected to meet you; I thought you rode off with your aunt toward Mt. Kisco."

"We did; but on our way home Aunt Octavia stopped to call on a friend, and as I did n't feel in a mood for visits this morning I rode on alone."

She spoke further of her aunt's friend, of whom I had never heard before, to calm herself before touching upon the cause of her wild ride or her wish to speak to me. She pinned on her hat and drew on her riding-gloves while I helped to make conversation, and soon regained her composure. The haste with which she had withdrawn into the wood, and the imperative wave of her crop by which she had bidden me follow her, indicated that something of importance had happened and that she wished to confide in me.

"I was walking my horse in the road beyond Bedford, just after I left Aunt Octavia, when who should ride up beside me but Mr. Wiggins. He had evidently been following me."

She expected me to express surprise; and with the information that Hezekiah had just imparted fresh in my mind I dare say she was not disappointed in the effect of her words. I was thinking rapidly and fearfully. If my friend had sought her in the highway and offered himself in some fresh accession of ardor, he might even now be a rejected and hopeless man; but I was unwilling to believe that this had happened.

"Hartley is fond of riding, and nothing could be more natural than for him to have his horse sent out from town."

"Oh, it's natural enough," she cried; "but I

was greatly taken aback when he rode up beside me."

"An old friend joining you in the highway, on a bright October morning! I can't for the life of me see anything surprising or alarming in that, Miss Hollister."

"But only yesterday, you remember I told you I had seen him walking with my sister."

"It's perfectly easy to talk to Hezekiah! It seems to me that that only shows a friendly attitude toward all the family. Let us deal with facts if I am to help you. I understand perfectly that Hartley Wiggins wishes to marry you; and that being the case I see no reason why he should n't be courteous to your sister. I've always heard that it's the proper thing to be polite to the sisters, cousins, and aunts of one's prospective wife. I know of no more delightful occupation than listening to Hezekiah. Just now, for an hour or so, I have been enjoying her conversation myself. Nothing could be more refreshing or stimulating. She is an unusual young woman, and most amazingly wise."

"You have seen Hezekiah this morning!" she exclaimed.

"I have indeed. I hope I may say that she and I are becoming good friends. I am learning to understand her; though, believe me, I don't

speak boastingly. However, this morning we got on famously together. But won't you continue and tell me what happened in the road when Hartley rode up beside you?"

"Oh, nothing happened; really nothing! Nothing could have happened, for the excellent reason that I ran away from him. It was n't what he did or said; it was the fear of what he might say!"

"If it had been Mr. Dick who had joined you in exactly the same way in the highway, you would not have minded in the least, Miss Hollister. Is n't that the truth?"

Her hand that had rested on the pommel of her saddle dropped to her side, and she stood erect, her eyes wide with wonder.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"I mean exactly what I have said; that if it had been that strutting young philosopher from the West you would — well, you would have allowed him to say what was in his mind, no matter whether it had been his latest thought on Kantianism, the weather, or his admiration for yourself. Am I not right?"

"I wonder, I wonder" — she faltered, drawing away, the better to observe me.

"You wonder how much I know! To relieve your mind without parleying further, I will say to you that I know everything."

"Then Aunt Octavia must have told you; and that seems incredible. It was distinctly understood" —

"Your aunt told me nothing. Not by words did any one tell me."

"Not by words?" she asked, eyeing me wonderingly and clearly fearing that I might be playing some trick upon her. "Then can it be that Hezekiah — but no! Hezekiah does n't know!"

"Trust Hezekiah for not telling secrets," I answered evasively. "Give me credit for some imagination. The air of Hopefield is stimulating, and in the few days I have spent in your aunt's house I have learned much that I never dreamed of before. I am not at all the person you greeted with so much courtesy in the library when I arrived there, a chimney-doctor and an ignorant person, a few afternoons ago, — called, as I thought, to prescribe for flues that proved to be in admirable condition, but really summoned by higher powers to assist the fates in the proper and orderly performance of their duties to several members of the house of Hollister, — yourself among them."

"I don't understand it; you are wholly inexplicable."

"I am the simplest and least guileful of beings,

I assure you. Yet I have done some things here not in the slightest way related to chimney doctoring; and something else I expect to do for which I believe you will thank me through all the years of your life."

"Ah, if you really know, that is possible!" she sighed wearily. "I am very tired of it all. I was very foolish ever to have agreed to Aunt Octavia's plan. You have seen those men, — any one of them might, you know" — And she shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"Any one of them might be the seventh man! There, you see I do know! And I mean to help you!"

She was immensely relieved; there was no question of that. Gratitude shone in her eyes; and then, as I marvelled at their beautiful dark depths, fear suddenly possessed them. The change in her was startling. Several motors had swept by in the outer road while we talked; they were faintly visible through the trees; and just now we both heard a horse and caught a fleeting glimpse of Hartley Wiggins, riding slowly with bowed head toward the inn. Cecilia's horse flung up his head, but she clapped her hands upon his nostrils and held them there to prevent his whinnying until that figure of despair had passed out of hearing.

I was smitten with sorrow for Hartley Wiggins. I could put myself in his place and imagine his feelings as he rode like a defeated general back to the inn, there to face the other suitors after the humiliating experience which Cecilia Hollister had just described. In his ignorance of the cause of her eagerness to escape from him, he no doubt believed that he had all unconsciously made himself intolerable to her. It was plain that that glimpse of him had touched Cecilia's pity; if I had doubted the sincerity of her regard for him before, I spurned the thought now. I was anxious to requicken hope in her, — an odd office for me to assume when in my own affairs I had always yielded my sword readily to the blue devils! Yet during my short stay at Hopefield I had already found it possible to restore Miss Octavia's confidence in her own chosen destiny, and in this delicate love-affair between Cecilia Hollister and my best friend I proffered counsel and sympathy with an assurance that astonished me.

"I have told you enough, Miss Hollister, to make it clear that I am in a position to help you. Believe me, I have no other business before me but to complete the service I have undertaken."

"But there is always" — she began, then

ceased abruptly, and lifted her head proudly — "there is always Mr. Wiggins's attitude toward my sister. Not for anything in the world would I cause her the slightest unhappiness. You must see that, now that you know her."

I laughed aloud. Cecilia's concern for Hezekiah's happiness was so absurd that I could not restrain my mirth for a moment. Displeasure showed promptly in Cecilia's face.

"I am sorry if you doubt my sincerity, Mr. Ames. I will put the matter directly, to make sure I have not been misunderstood heretofore, and say that if Hezekiah is interested in Hartley Wiggins and cares for him in the least, — you know she is young and susceptible, — I shall take care that he never sees me again."

"Pardon me, but maybe you don't quite understand Hezekiah!"

"Is it possible, then, that you do?" she inquired coldly. "I imagine your opportunities for seeing her have not been numerous."

"Well, it is n't so much a matter of seeing her, when you've read of her all your life and dreamed about her. She's in every fairy story that ever was written; she dances through the mythologies of all races. Hers is the kingdom of the pure in heart. Her mind is like a beautiful bright meadow by the sea, and her thoughts the

dipping of swallow-wings on lightly swaying grasses."

Cecilia's manner changed, and she smiled.

"You seem to have an attack of something; it looks serious. You have n't known her long enough to find out so much!"

"Longer than you would believe. She and I sat on the shore together when Ulysses sailed by; we were among those present at the sack of Troy; we heard Roland's ivory trumpet at Roncesvalles."

"Such words from you amaze me. I did n't imagine there was so much romance in chimneys."

"They are full of it! Commend me to an open fire, with a flue that knows its business, and a dream or two! I've renounced my profession. I shall hereafter offer myself as adviser to persons in need of illusions; we'd all be poets if we dared!"

I helped her into the saddle, and she looked down at me with amusement in her eyes. My praise of Hezekiah had pleased her, and I felt, as when we journeyed together into town, her kindly, human qualities. The perplexities and embarrassments resulting from her compact with her aunt had doubtless checked the natural flow of her spirits. She talked on buoyantly, though

I was eager to be off, to avert the catastrophe that only her flight had prevented and which Wiggins might at any moment precipitate. She gathered up her reins.

"You are not coming home for luncheon? Then I shall see you at four. I hope the hiding-place of the ghost will prove interesting. Aunt Octavia has built her hopes high, and I may add that she has expressed the greatest admiration of you to me. On her ride this morning she declared that great things are in store for you. I hope so, too, Mr. Ames."

She gave me her hand and rode away, and before I had reached the highway she was across the bridge and galloping rapidly homeward.

The inn was a mile distant, and I set off at a brisk pace, turning over in my mind various projects for controlling the characters now upon the stage in such manner that Wiggins should become the seventh man. Cecilia could not always run away from him without violating the terms of her aunt's stipulation; and it was unlikely that she would attempt further to guide or thwart the pointing finger of fate. I relied little upon any arrangement effected among the suitors to stand together. Hume had already found a chance to speak. Lord Arrowood had bitten the dust and turned his face homeward,

and Wiggins had been near the brink only that morning. It was unlikely that any of the active candidates remaining would stumble upon the key to the situation, which Hezekiah had given into my keeping.

It was well on toward two o'clock when I approached the inn. Before long the suitors would depart for their afternoon call at the Manor, which was an established event of the day. Just as I was about to enter the gate I was arrested by an imperious voice calling, and John Stewart Dick came running toward me. He had evidently been expecting me, and I paused, thinking him about to renew his attack upon me. To my surprise he greeted me cordially, even offering his hand.

"You thought you would come after all. Well, I'm glad you did. I've decided that there should be peace between us."

In stature he was the shortest of the suitors, but what he lacked in height was compensated for by a tremendous dignity. A dark Napoleonic lock lay across his forehead, and his clear-cut profile otherwise suggested the Corsican, the resemblance being, I wickedly assumed, one that the philosopher encouraged.

"You have several times addressed me, Mr. Ames, in a spirit of contumely which I have hesi-

tated to punish by the chastisement you deserve; but I am willing to let bygones be bygones."

His changed tone put me on guard, but it was impossible for me to take him seriously. In spite of the fact that he was a vigorous muscular young fellow who could have thrashed me without trouble, I could not resist the impulse he always roused in me to address him in language any self-respecting man would resent.

"Chant the *dies iræ* with considerable *allegro*, Plato, for I am hungry and would fain pay for food at the adjacent inn."

"I will overlook the coarseness of your humor," he rejoined haughtily. "My own time is as valuable as yours. You have sneered at my attainments as a philosopher; but I will pass that for the present. I am disposed to treat you magnanimously. You have an excellent opinion of yourself; you have come here as an intruder upon the rights of those of us who followed Cecilia Hollister across Europe and home to America; but in spite of this I waive my rights in your favor. I had intended to offer myself to Miss Hollister this afternoon, with every hope of success, but I yield to you. My only request is that you inform me at once when you have learned her decision."

He clapped on his cap and folded his arms,

clearly satisfied with the expressions of surprise to which my feelings betrayed me. Could it be possible that he had guessed the truth, perhaps by deductive processes of which I was ignorant? Whether he had reasoned from some remark thrown out by Miss Octavia as to the influence of seven in the affairs of life and her application of that fateful principle to the choice of a husband for Cecilia, I could not guess, but assuming that he had caught that clue, he might readily enough have managed the rest. Having crossed on the steamer with the suitor host, a man of his intelligence might readily enough have kept track of the vanquished. In any case he had hit upon me as a likely victim, and on the plea of generously waiting till I had tried my luck he hoped to thrust me forward as the sixth suitor, and immediately thereafter project himself as the inevitable seventh man. The whole situation was rendered perilously complex by the knowledge that, unaided, he had possessed himself of so much dangerous information. I must not, however, allow him to see what I suspected.

"My dear professor, there's an ancient warning against the Greeks bearing gifts. You must give me time to inspect the horse."

"Are you questioning my good faith?"

"Be it far from me! I'm a good deal tickled

though by your genial assumption that if I offered myself to this lady I should be declined with thanks. You have fretted yourself into a state of mind that bodes ill for American philosophy."

He was again belligerent. It may have occurred to him that I might know as much as he, but at any rate he grinned; it was a saturnine grin I did not like.

"I'm starving to death at the door of an inn, and you must excuse me. Have you seen Hartley Wiggins lately?"

"I have, indeed! He's taken to lonely horseback rides; he's off somewhere now. He has n't the stamina for a contest like this. One by one the autumn leaves are falling," he added, with special intention, "and I have given you your chance."

"Thanks, light-bringing Socrates from the lands of the Ogalallas! For so much courtesy I shall take pleasure in reading all your posthumous works. Let us cease being absurd."

He laid his hand on my arm and lowered his tone.

"Don't be an ass. If you and I both know what's underneath all this mystery we might come to an understanding."

"I don't follow you. Please make a light, like a man about to have an idea."

"You mean that you don't understand?" He eyed me doubtfully, uncertain whether I knew or not.

"You have implied that I am incapable of understanding; suppose we let it go at that."

With this I left him and entered the low-raftered office — it was really a pleasant lounging-room, unspoiled by the usual hotel-office paraphernalia. Dick had followed close behind, and as I paused, hearing voices raised angrily in the dining-room beyond, I turned to him for an explanation. As the suitors had been the only guests of the inn since their advent, having stipulated that the proprietor should exclude other applicants for meals or lodging, I attributed the commotion to strife in their own ranks. Dick nodded sullenly and bade me keep on.

"You'd better take a look at those fellows. I've quit them — quite out of it; remember that."

The dining-room door was slightly ajar, and I flung it open.

Ormsby, Shallenberger, Henderson, Hume, Gorse, and Arbuthnot had been engaged with cards at a round table in an alcove, but some dispute having apparently risen, they stood in their places engaged in acrimonious debate. As near as I could determine, some one of them — I think it was Ormsby — wished to abandon the

game, which had been undertaken to determine in what order they should be permitted to pay visits to Hopefield in future, the calls *en masse* having grown intolerable. They were so absorbed in their argument that they failed to note my appearance, and I stood unobserved within the door. The dialogue between the card-players was swift and hot.

"It's no good, I tell you!" cried Ormsby. "There's no fairness in this unless all take their chances together!"

"You ought to have thought of that before we began. This was your scheme, but because the cards are running against you, you want to quit. I say we'll go on!" This from Henderson, who struck the table sharply as he concluded.

"You knew Wiggins and Dick were n't going in when we started, and you are not likely to get them in now. Your anxiety to cut the rest of us out by any means seems to have unsettled your mind," shouted Gorse. "I say let's drop this and stand to our original agreement that no man speak till the end of the fortnight."

"After that whole scheme has been torn to pieces like paper! There's been nothing fair in this business from the start! We ought to have kept Arrowood here and held together. And we ought to have got rid of that Ames fellow — he

did n't belong in this at all; and instead of protecting ourselves against outsiders we have sat here like a lot of fools while he's been making himself agreeable there in the house — right there in the house!"

Ormsby's voice rose to a disagreeable squeak as he closed with this indictment of me. Hume fidgeted uneasily, and met my eye so warily that I wondered whether he suspected that I knew of his breach of faith with the other suitors. Much dallying with Scandinavian literature had not lightened his heart, and there was nothing in Ibsen to which he could refer his present plight. Shallenberger seemed to be the only one of the group who had not lost his senses. He was in the farther corner of the alcove, out of sight from the door, but I heard him distinctly as he addressed the other suitors with rising anger.

"We're acting like cads, and cads of the most contemptible sort! I only agreed to this game to satisfy Ormsby. The idea of our sitting here to draw cards to determine the order in which we shall offer ourselves to the noblest and most beautiful woman in the world would be coarse and vulgar if it were not so ridiculous! The men who had their chance on the steamer or after we came here — and I don't pretend to know who they are — ought in decency to have left the

field. We seem to have forgotten that we pretend to be gentlemen; or, far less pardonable, that we pay court to a lady. Damn you all! I refuse to have anything more to do with you, and if you try to interfere with my affairs in any way I'll smash your heads collectively or separately as you prefer!"

My interest in this colloquy had led me further into the room, and hearing my step they all turned and faced me. Dick had continued at my side, but the black looks they sent our way were intended, I thought, rather for me. Shallenberger, having taken himself out of the tangle, leaned against the wall and filled his pipe with unconcern. My appearance roused Ormsby to a fresh outburst.

"You're responsible! If you had n't forced yourself upon the ladies at Hopefield there would n't have been any of this trouble!"

"You're only an impostor anyhow. You went to the house to fix a chimney, and seem to think you're engaged to spend the rest of your natural life there!" protested Henderson, twisting the ends of his moustache.

Then they dropped me and assailed Dick.

"We'd like to know what you expect to gain by dropping out! You got cold feet mighty sudden!" bellowed Ormsby.

Gorse and Henderson paid similar tributes to the apostate, whose melancholy grin only deepened. Shallenberger was pacing the floor slowly and puffing his pipe. Hume and Arbuthnot growled occasionally, but shared, I thought, Shallenberger's changed feeling.

My silence had been effective up to this time, but I was afraid to risk it longer. Dick, I imagined, had kept close to me for fear of missing any part of the altercation he knew my appearance would provoke. The more vociferous suitors had howled themselves hoarse and glared at me while I considered the situation. Henderson rallied for a final shot.

"A good horsewhipping is what you deserve," he cried, leveling his finger at me.

"Gentlemen," I began, not without inward quaking, "you have spoken loud naughty words to me, and in reply I must say that your vocal efforts suggest only the melodies of the braying jackass, and that your manners, to speak mildly, are susceptible of considerable improvement."

"You leave this neighborhood within an hour!" boomed Ormsby; and in his efforts to free himself from his chair it fell backward with a crash that echoed through the long room.

"Then summon the coroner by telephone, for I shall not be taken alive," I answered quietly,

trying to recall my youthful delight in Porthos, Athos, and Aramis. "I should dislike to change the mild color-scheme of this pleasant dining-room, but as sure as you lay hands on me, these walls will become a playground for any corpuscles you carry in your loathsome persons."

"Come along, let us put him out," Henderson was saying in an aside to Ormsby.

"You were playing a game here for a stake not yours for the winning," I continued. "Now I suggest that you shuffle the pack, — you three, who are so full of valor, — shuffle the pack, I say, and draw for the jack of clubs. Whoever is the fortunate man I shall take pleasure in pitching through yonder very charming casement."

"Agreed!" cried Henderson, and the three flung themselves into their chairs.

The alacrity of their consent had unnerved me for a moment. D'Artagnan, I was sure, would have fought them all, but I consoled myself, as the cards rattled on the bare table, with the reflection that, considering the fact that I had never in my life laid violent hands on a fellow-being, I was conducting myself with admirable assurance. My weight has always hung well within one hundred and thirty, and physicians have told me that I was incapable of taking on flesh or muscle. Any one of these men could

easily toss me through the window I had indicated as a means of their own exit.

Shallenberger caught my eye and indicated with a slight jerk of the head that I had better run before it was too late. The painstaking care with which Henderson had fallen upon the cards was disquieting, to put it mildly. Dick nudged me in the ribs and offered to hold my coat.

"It will not be necessary," I replied carelessly. "Tender your services to the other gentlemen."

I felt the cold sweat gathering on my brow. The three had begun to draw cards, and I heard them slap the bits of pasteboard smartly upon the table as they lifted them from the deck and, finding the jack of clubs still undrawn, waited the next turn. I had no idea that a pack of cards would dissolve so readily by the drawing process, and my memory ceased trying to recall the adventures of D'Artagnan and hovered with ominous persistence about the mad don of La Mancha. I cannot say now whether I stood my ground out of sheer physical inability to run or from an accession of courage due to the remembrance of my success in detecting the Hopefield ghost. In any case I affected coolness as I waited, even throwing out my arms to "shoot" my cuffs once or twice, and yawning.

"Come, gentlemen, hurry: let us not waste time here," I exclaimed impatiently.

"If Ormsby turns up the card you're a dead man," Dick was muttering gloomily.

"They're all alike to me," I replied loudly. "Mr. Ormsby is very beautiful; I shall hope not to disfigure him permanently;" but as I spoke my tongue was a wobbly dry clapper in my mouth.

I was bending over now, watching the three men pick up the cards, and once, when I misread the jack of spades for the jack of clubs, a shudder passed over me. They were down to the last card, and Ormsby's hand was on it. I recall that a group of steins on a shelf over Henderson's head seemed to be dancing wildly. Then I looked at the floor to steady myself, and hope leaped within me, for there, by Ormsby's foot,—a large and heavy one,—lay an upturned card, the jack of clubs, whose lone symbol magnified itself enormously in my amazed eyes.

At this moment, I became conscious that something had occurred to distract the attention of the other men, who were staring at some one who had entered noiselessly.

"Gentlemen, you seem immensely interested in the turn of those cards. I am glad to have arrived at the critical moment. Mr. Ormsby, will

you kindly lift the remaining card from the table?"

Miss Octavia stood beside me. She was dressed in a dark brown riding-habit; the feather in her fedora hat emphasized her usual brisk air. She swung her riding-crop lightly in her hand, and bent over the table with the deepest interest.

Ormsby turned up the card. It was the ten of diamonds.

"Gentlemen," I cried, pointing to the card, "what trick is this? Can it be possible that you have been trifling with me in a fashion for which men have died the world over by sword and pistol!"

"Kindly explain, Arnold, the nature of this difficulty," Miss Octavia commanded.

"Simply this, Miss Hollister, if I must answer; I had offered to fight these three gentlemen in order. It was agreed that the man who drew the jack of clubs from the pack with which they had been playing should be my first victim. They have shuffled their own cards and have drawn the whole pack and there is no jack of clubs in the pack! The only possible explanation is one to which I hesitate to apply the obvious plain Saxon terms."

"It dropped out, that's all! You don't dare

pretend that we threw out the jack to avoid drawing it!" protested Ormsby, though I saw from the glances the trio exchanged that they suspected one another. Ormsby and Gorse bent

down to look for the missing card, but before they found it I stepped forward and drove my fist upon the table with all the power I could put into the blow.

"Stop!" I cried. "I gave you every opportunity to stand up and take a trouncing, but I

need hardly say that after this contemptible knavery I refuse to soil my hands on you!"

"Do you insinuate" — began Henderson, jumping to his feet.

"Gentlemen," said Miss Hollister, lifting the riding-crop, "it is perfectly clear to me that Mr. Ames has gone as far as any gentleman need go in protecting his honor. I do not offer myself as an arbitrator here, but I advise my young friend that nothing further is required of him in this deplorable affair."

With one sweep of her crop she brushed to the floor the three piles of cards that lay on the table as they had been stacked when drawn.

"Arnold," she said, with indescribable dignity, "will you kindly attend me to my horse?"

XIX

THE GHOST OF ADONIRAM CALDWELL

A STABLE-BOY held Miss Octavia's horse at the inn-door. Her face, her figure, her voice expressed outraged dignity as she tested the saddle-girth.

"You need never tell me what had happened to provoke your wrath, for that is none of my affair; but I wish to say that your conduct and bearing won my highest approval. They had undoubtedly hidden the jack of clubs to avoid the drubbing you would have administered to the unfortunate man who would have drawn that card if it had been in the pack."

"I was not in the slightest danger at any time, Miss Hollister," I protested. "By one of those tricks of fate to which you and I are becoming so accustomed, the card had fallen to the floor unnoticed. If you had not arrived so opportunely the lost jack would have been discovered, the cards reshuffled, and very likely Mr. Ormsby would have been dusting the inn-floor with me at this very minute."

"I refuse to believe any such thing," declared Miss Octavia, who had mounted and continued

speaking from the saddle. "Your perfect confidence was admirable, and I shudder to think of the terrible punishment you would have given them. I do not particularly dislike Mr. Ormsby, though the possibility of Cecilia marrying him has troubled me not a little as I have recalled the unromantic aspect of Utica as seen from the car-windows; but it is much to your credit that you defied them all and brought them to the fighting-point, and then, by a stroke of cleverness it pleased me to witness, placed them irretrievably in the wrong."

If Miss Octavia wished to view my performances in this flattering light it seemed unnecessary and unkind to object. Now that I was in the open again with a whole skin I was not averse to the victor's crown; I would even wear it tilted slightly over one ear. Birds have been killed by shots that missed the real target; bunker sands are rich in gutta percha and good intentions. I was a fraud, but a cheerful one.

"It was only a pleasant incident of the day's work, Miss Hollister. I'm going to engage a squire and take to the open road as soon as all this is over."

"As soon as all what is over!" she demanded, eyeing me keenly.

"Oh, the work I've undertaken to do here. I

flatter myself that I have made some progress; but within twenty-four hours I dare say that we shall have seen the end."

"Your words are not wholly luminous, Arnold."

"It is much better that it should be so. You have trusted me so far, and I have no intention of failing you now. If I say that the crisis is near at hand in a certain matter that interests you greatly, you will understand that I am not striking ignorantly in the dark."

"If you know what I suspect you know, Arnold Ames, you are even shrewder than I thought you, and you had already taken a high place in my regard. The curtains of the windows just behind you have shown considerable agitation since we have been speaking, not due, I think, to the wind, as there is no air stirring. Those gentlemen you have just vanquished are timidly watching you. Your daring and prowess have greatly alarmed them. You may be sure they will think twice before provoking your wrath again."

"I devoutly hope they will," I replied, glancing carelessly over my shoulder, and catching a glimpse of Henderson as he drew hastily out of sight. "But will you tell me just how you came to visit the inn at this particular hour?"

"Nothing could be simpler. I had luncheon at the house of a friend on whom I called. Cecilia had left me to continue her ride alone, and on my way home I thought I would ride by the Prescott Arms to see how the guests were faring. You see," — she paused and gave a twitch to her hat to prolong my suspense, — "you see, I own the Prescott Arms!"

With this she rode away, and not caring to risk a further meeting with the angry suitors from whom Miss Octavia had rescued me by so narrow a margin, I set off across the fields toward Hopefield. From the stile I saw Miss Octavia in the highway half a mile distant, sending her horse along at a spirited canter. I reached the house without further adventures, was served with a cold luncheon in my room, and by the time I had changed my clothes Miss Octavia sent me word that Pepperton had arrived.

Miss Octavia and the architect were conversing earnestly when I reached the library; and from the abruptness with which they ceased on my entrance I imagined that I had been the subject of their talk. Pepperton is not only one of the finest architects America has produced, but one of the jolliest of fellows. He grasped my hand cordially and pointed to the fireplace.

"So you've at last found one of my jobs to

overhaul, have you! You must n't let this get out on me, old man; it would shatter my reputation!"

"Please observe that the flue is drawing splendidly now," I answered. "A ghost had been strolling up and down the chimney, but now that I have found his lair he will not trouble Miss Hollister's fireplaces again."

"I have waited for your arrival, Mr. Pepperton, that we might have the benefit of your knowledge of the house in following the trail of this ghost which Arnold has discovered. But we must give Arnold credit for effecting the discovery alone and unaided. I destroyed the plans I obtained from your office so that Arnold might be fully tested as to his capacity for managing the most difficult situations."

When Miss Octavia first referred to me as Arnold, Pepperton raised his brows a trifle; the second time he glanced at me laughingly. He seemed greatly amused by Miss Octavia's seriousness, but her amiable attitude toward me clearly puzzled him.

"It takes a good man to uncover a thing I try to hide. I said nothing to you, Miss Hollister, about the retention within the walls of this house of parts of an old one that formerly occupied the site, for the reason that I thought you might

refuse to buy the estate. The gentleman for whom I built Hopefield was superstitious, as many men of advanced years are, as to the building of a new house, and as the site he chose is one of the finest in the county he compelled me to construct this house — which is the most satisfactory I have built — in such manner that enough of the old should be kept intact to soothe his superstitious soul with the idea that he had merely altered an old house, not built a new one. As it is the architect's business to yield to such caprices I obeyed him strictly. So there are two rooms of an old farmhouse hidden under the east wing, and it amused me, once I had got into it, to preserve part of the old stairway, and connect the retained chambers with the upper hall of this house. I had to patch the original stair, which was only one flight, with discarded lumber from the old house, but I flatter myself that I managed it neatly. I even saved the old nails to avert the wrath of the evil spirits. When the umbrella and dyspepsia-cure man died, — for he did die, as you know, — I believed the secret had died with him, as he was very sensitive about his superstitions. Most of the laborers on that part of the job were brought from a long distance, and I supposed they never really knew just what we were doing.

I might have known, though, that if a fellow as clever as Ames got to pecking at the house the trick would be discovered. But the chimney, old man, — what on earth was the matter with it?"

"It will never happen again, and I promised the ghost never to tell how it was done."

"You were quite right in doing that, Arnold, — a ghost's secrets should be sacred; but let us now proceed to the hidden chambers," said Miss Hollister, rising without further ado.

She summoned Cecilia, to whom we explained matters briefly, and at Pepperton's suggestion the four of us went directly to the fourth floor, so that Miss Octavia might see the whole contrivance in the most effective manner possible.

My awkward pen falters in the attempt to convey any idea of Miss Octavia's delight in Pepperton's revelation; she kept repeating her admiration of his genius, and her praise of my cleverness, which, to protect Hezekiah, I was forced to accept meekly. When in broad daylight Pepperton found and pressed the spring in the upper hall and the hidden door opened, with a slowness that indicated a realization of its own dramatic value, Miss Octavia cried out gleefully, like a child that witnesses the manipulation of a new and wonderful toy.

"To think, Cecilia, that I should never have known of this if that chimney had not smoked!" — a remark that caused Pepperton to glance at me curiously. He knew as well as I did that with ordinary care every flue in that house would have drawn splendidly. "Beyond any question," Miss Octavia kept asserting, "beneath the chambers of the old house down there we shall find the bones of that British soldier who perished here; or it is even possible that a chest of hidden treasure is concealed beneath the floor. What do you yourself suspect, Mr. Pepperton?"

We were lighting candles preparatory to stepping down into the dark stairway, and Pepperton was plainly hard put to keep from laughing.

"I assure you, Miss Hollister, that I have told you all I know about the rooms down there. I'm not very strong in the ghost-faith; and our friend the umbrella-man never dreamed of such a thing, I assure you, not even after he had satisfied his fierce craving for pie."

Miss Octavia followed Pepperton slowly, pausing frequently to hold her candle close to the stair-walls, whose rough surfaces confirmed all that Pepperton had said of the preservation of the old timbers. I had brought a handful of candles, and when we had reached the dark rooms beneath, I lighted these and set them up

in the black corners of the old rooms, in which, Miss Octavia remarked, not even the wall paper had been disturbed. The exit into the coal-cellar, and concealed openings left for ventilation which had escaped me before, were now pointed out by the architect, who kept laughing at the huge joke of it all.

Cecilia murmured her surprise repeatedly as we continued the examination; nothing quite like this had ever happened in the world before, but even as we walked through those hidden rooms my thoughts reverted to the crisis so near at hand in her affairs. I had pledged myself to her service, but I saw no way yet of assuring the proper sequence of proposals. The ultimate seventh must be Wiggins; but how could I manage the penultimate sixth! Cecilia's own apparent freedom from care on this tour of inspection deepened my sense of responsibility to all concerned. Dick might by now have persuaded some one of the others at the inn to offer himself, thus closing the gap, and I had determined that the Westerner should not outwit me. It was some consolation to know that while Cecilia was in these lost rooms in my company, she was safe from Dick's machinations.

My thoughts were, however, given a new direction by Miss Octavia. She had been scrutin-

izing the floor closely, asking us all to bring our candles to bear upon it, that she might search thoroughly for any signs of a trapdoor beneath which the bones of the British soldier might repose.

"You can't tell me," she averred in her own peculiar vein, "that a house as old as this has been preserved merely to divert calamity from a superstitious gentleman engaged in the manufacture of ribless umbrellas and a dyspepsia cure."

Miss Octavia Hollister was a woman to be humored; we all knew this; but I realized with a pang that she was about to be disappointed. I had expected her to forget the British soldier in the perfectly tangible joy of secret springs and ghostly chambers; and if I had foreseen her persistence in clinging to the tradition of the ill-fated Briton I should have taken the trouble to hide a few bones under the flooring. Miss Octavia had brought a stick from the coal-room, and was thumping the floor with it even while Pepperton tried to discourage her further investigations. We were all ranged about her with our candles, and these, with the others I had thrust into the corners, lighted the room well.

"I'm afraid you've seen the whole of it, Miss Hollister," said Pepperton. "The old house was built after the Revolution, I judge, but your

British soldier was probably left hanging to a tree and never buried at all."

"Mr. Pepperton," she replied, holding the candle so close to the architect that he blinked, "it would be far from me to question your knowledge of history, but I should not be at all surprised if the builder of this old house had fought on the seas with John Paul Jones, and had buried beneath these walls the very sea-chest that had been his companion on many eventful voyages."

Pepperton gasped at the absurdity of this, and then suppressed his mirth with difficulty. Cecilia faintly expostulated; but I knew Miss Octavia would not be dissuaded, and I thought it as well to facilitate her search and be done with it. A sailor with rings in his ears and a cutlass dangling at his side might have come home from the wars and established himself on a farm in Westchester County and even buried his sea-chest under the floor of his house, but in all likelihood he never had. It was not my office, however, to advise Miss Octavia Hollister in such matters. Pepperton had changed his tune and seemed anxious to follow my lead. To him she was an eccentric old woman, whose wealth alone gained her indulgence in such preposterous obsessions as this; but my own feelings were

those of regret that she must so quickly be disillusioned. To me she had become an incarnation of the play-spirit that never grows old, and there may have risen in me an honest belief that what this unusual woman sought she would somehow find. Once or twice when the uneven worn flooring had boomed hollowly under her stick I had knelt promptly to examine the planks, and had thus disposed of several false alarms. Pepperton feigned interest for a time, but was becoming bored. Cecilia studied the quaint pattern of the wall paper, which she said ought to be reproduced, as nothing in contemporaneous designs equaled it.

Miss Octavia had been over the floors of the two rooms twice, and was about to desist. Her less frequent appeals to the rest of us for confirmation of some suspected change in the responses to her thumping indicated disappointment. She made her last stand in the corner of the smaller room, and as we all stood holding our lights, we were conscious that the dull monotonous thump suddenly changed its tone. We all noticed it at the same instant, and exchanged glances of surprise.

"Do you hear that, gentlemen?"

She subdued her gratification in the rebuking glance she gave us. Calm and unhurried, she

rested a moment on her stick, with the candle's soft glow about her, a smile ineffably sweet on her face.

"The timbers may have rotted away underneath. We did n't raise these floors," said Pepperton; but we both dropped to our knees and brought all the candle-light to bear upon the flooring. Dust and mortar, shaken loose in the destruction of the house, filled the cracks. Pepperton, deeply absorbed, continued to sound the corner with his knuckles.

"It really looks as though these boards had been cut for some purpose," he said, whipping out his knife.

I ran to the kindling-room and found a hatchet, and when I returned he had dug the dirt out of the edges of the floor-planks. Silence held us all as I set to prying up the boards.

"I beg of you to exercise the greatest care, gentlemen. If bones are interred here we must do them no sacrilege," warned Miss Octavia.

By this time we all, I think, began to believe that the flooring might really have been cut in this corner of the old room to permit the hiding of something. The room had grown hot, and Cecilia opened the cellar-windows outside to admit air. The old planks clung stubbornly

to their joists, but after I had loosened one, the others came up quickly and the smell of dry earth filled the room. Pepperton had, at Miss Octavia's direction, brought a chisel and crowbar from the tool-room in the cellar, and he stood ready with these when I tore up the last board, disclosing an oblong space about five feet long and slightly over three feet wide. It was possible that this was the whole story, but Pepperton began driving the bar vigorously into the close-packed soil. As he loosened the earth I scooped it out, and we soon had penetrated about six inches beneath the surface.

We were all excited now. The edge of the bar struck repeatedly against something that resisted sharply. It might have been a root, but when Pepperton shifted the point of attack the same booming sound answered to the prodding. Pepperton now thought it might be only an empty cask or a box of no interest whatever; but Miss Octavia, hovering close with a candle, encouraged us to go on, and was fertile in suggestions as to the most expeditious manner of resurrecting whatever might be buried there. We were pretty well satisfied from the soundings that the hidden object was somewhat shorter and narrower than the hole itself.

"Quite naturally so," observed Miss Octavia,

"for a man who buries a treasure has to allow himself room for getting at it."

We worked on silently, Pepperton loosening the soil with the bar while I shoveled it out. In half an hour we had revealed a long flat wooden surface, which to our anxious imaginations was the lid of some sort of box.

"It's sound red cedar," pronounced Pepperton, examining the wood where the tools had splintered it.

"Of course it's cedar," replied Miss Octavia, bending down to it. "I knew it would be cedar. It always is!"

We paused to laugh at her confident tone, and Cecilia suggested that as there was still a good deal to do before we could free the box, we should send for some of the servants to complete the work.

"I would n't take a thousand dollars for my chance at this," Pepperton answered; and we fell to again.

It must have been nearly six o'clock when we dragged out into that candle-lighted chamber a stout, well-fashioned box. The earth clung to its sides jealously, and it was bound with strips of brass that shone brightly where the scraping of our tools had burnished it. We pried off the heavy lock with a good deal of difficulty, and

when it was free Miss Octavia asserted her right to the treasure-trove with much calmness.

"I should never forgive myself if I allowed this opportunity to pass; you must permit me to have the first look."

"Certainly, Miss Hollister; if it had n't been for you this chest would have remained hidden to the end of all time," Pepperton replied.

We gathered close about her as she knelt beside the box. My hand shook as I held my candle, and I think Miss Octavia was the only one in the room who showed no nervousness. Cecilia sighed deeply several times, and Pepperton mopped his face with his handkerchief. The lid did not yield as readily as we had expected, and it was necessary to resort to the hatchet and chisel again; but we were careful that it should be Miss Octavia's hand that finally raised the lid.

We all exclaimed in various keys as the light fell upon the open chest. The musty odor of old garments greeted us at once. The box was well filled, and its contents were neatly arranged. Miss Octavia first lifted out the remnants of a military uniform that lay on top.

"It's his ragged regimentals!" cried Cecilia, as we unfolded an officer's coat of blue and buff, sadly decrepit and faded; "and he was not a British soldier at all, but an American patriot."

Time and service had dealt even more harshly with an American flag on which the thirteen white stars floated dimly on the dull blue field. It

had been bound tightly about a packet of papers which Miss Octavia asked Pepperton to examine.

"These are commissions appointing a certain Adoniram Caldwell to various positions in the Continental Army. Adoniram had the right stuff

in him; here he's discharged as a private to become an ensign; rose from ensign to colonel, and seems to have been in most of the big doings. 'For gallantry in the recent engagement at Stony Point, on recommendation of General Anthony Wayne' — by Jove, that does rather carry you back!"

Half a dozen of these documents traced Adoniram Caldwell's career to the end of the Revolution and his retirement from the military service with the rank of colonel. A sealed letter attached to these commissions next held our attention. The ends were dovetailed in the old style before the day of envelopes, and evidently care had been taken in folding and sealing it. The superscription, in a round bold hand, without flourishes, read: "To Whom It May Concern."

"I suppose it concerns us as much as anybody," remarked Miss Octavia. "What do you say, gentlemen; shall we open it?"

We all demanded breathlessly that she break the seal, and we were soon bending over her with our lights. The ink had blurred and in spots rust had obliterated the writing: —

"I, Roger Hartley Wiggins, sometime known as Adoniram Caldwell" —

"Hartley Wiggins!" we gasped; and I felt Cecilia's hand clasp my arm.

Miss Octavia continued reading, and as she was obliged to pause often and refer illegible lines to the rest of us, I have copied the following from the letter itself, with only slight changes of punctuation and spelling.

"I, Roger Hartley Wiggins, sometime known as Adoniram Caldwell, having now resumed my proper name, and being about to marry, and having begun the construction of a habitation for myself wherein to end my days, truthfully set forth these matters:

"My father, Hiram Wiggins of Rhode Island, having supported the royalist cause in our late war for Independence, and angered by my friendliness to the patriots, and he, with . . . brothers and sister having returned to England after the evacuation of Boston, I joined the Continental troops under General Putnam on Long Island, in July, 1776, serving in various commands thereafter, to the best of my ability, to the end. . . . My father has now returned to Rhode Island, and has, I learn, been making inquiries touching my whereabouts and condition, so that I have every hope that we may become reconciled. Yet as my services to the Country were against his wishes and caused so much harshness and heartache, and being now come

into a part of the country where I am unknown, I am decided to resume my rightful name, that my wife and children may bear it and in the hope that I may myself yet add to it some honor. . . .

"Nor shall my wife or any children that may be born to me, know from me . . . (*badly blurred.*) Yet not caring to destroy my sword, which I bore with some credit, nor these testimonials of respect and confidence I received as Adoniram Caldwell at various times and from various personages of renown, both civilians and in the military service, I place them under my house now building, where I hope in God's care to end my days in peace. I would in like case make like choice again."

Ten lines following this were wholly illegible, but just before the date (June 17, 1789), and the signature, which was written large, was this: —

"God preserve these American states that they endure in unity and concord forever!"

We had all been moved by the reading of this long-lost letter, and Miss Octavia's voice had faltered several times. As I turned to Cecilia once or twice during the recital of the dead patriot's message, I saw tears brimming her eyes.

"Mr. Wiggins once told me that his great-

grandfather had lived somewhere in Westchester County, but I fancy he had no idea that Hopefield was the identical spot," remarked Miss Octavia. "It seems incredible, and yet I dare say the hand of fate is in it."

"Oh, it's so wonderful; so beyond belief!" cried Cecilia, reverently folding the letter, which, I observed, she retained in her own hands.

"It's wonderful," added Miss Octavia promptly, taking the sword, which Pepperton had with difficulty drawn from its battered scabbard, "that even a discerning woman like me could have been so mistaken. I recall with humility that last Fourth of July, at Berlin, I reprimanded Mr. Wiggins severely because his family had not been represented in the war for American Independence. By the irony of circumstances it becomes my duty to present to him the very sword that his admirable great-grandfather bore in that momentous struggle. I shall, with his permission, place a bronze tablet on the outer wall of this house to preserve the patriot's memory."

Several copies of New York newspapers, half a dozen French gold coins, the miniature of a woman's face, which we assumed to be that of Roger Wiggins's mother or sister, were briefly examined; then by Miss Octavia's orders we care-

fully returned everything to the chest. Several packets of letters we did not open.

"Arnold," she said when we had closed the chest, "will you and Mr. Pepperton kindly carry that box to my room? No servant's hand shall touch it; and I shall myself give it to Mr. Wiggins at the earliest opportunity."

We had lost track of time in those hidden rooms, preserved by the whim of one man that the secret of another might be discovered, and found with surprise, after the chest had been carried to Miss Octavia's apartments, that it was after seven o'clock. We had been in the hidden rooms for more than three hours.

"We shall have much to talk about to-night, and I fancy we are all a good deal shaken. It's not often we receive a letter from a dead man, so we shall admit no callers to-night unless, indeed, Mr. Wiggins should chance to come," announced Miss Octavia. "The next time Hartley Wiggins visits this house he shall come as a conquering hero."

"I hope so," replied Cecilia brokenly.

We were still at dinner when the cards of Dick and the other suitors I had last seen at the Prescott Arms were brought in; but Wiggins made no sign, and I wondered.

XX

HEZEKIAH PARTITIONS THE KINGDOM

The man who looked after my needs handed me a note the next morning which added fresh hazards to Cecilia's already perilous plight.

"Left with the gardener before six o'clock by a boy from the village. Said it was most confidential, sir."

I waited till he had left the room before opening it. A square white envelope addressed to Arnold Ames, Esq., Hopefield Manor, told me nothing, and the handwriting was inscrutable. It slanted slightly upward; the small letters were half-printed and quaintly shaded. If a woman's, she had scorned the rail-fence models of the boarding-schools; if a man's — but I knew its gender well enough! The white note sheet within was unadorned, and the same pen had traced compactly, within the widest possible margins, the following: —

Gooseberry Bungalow,
Before Breakfast.

Dear Chimneys: — Pep stopped here yesterday to see B. H. He and C. old pals. Watch him. Where's Wig? H. H.

The initials were superfluous, and yet the sight of them pleased me mightily. In her semi-printing she curved the pillars of the H's like parentheses, so that they bore an amusing resemblance to four men striding forward against a storm. The report of a chief of scouts smuggled through the enemy's lines could not have improved on her billet for succinctness, and the information conveyed was startling enough. We had been dealing with a company of suitors outside the barricade; now came warning of the presence of a strange knight within the gates who greatly multiplied the perils of the situation. The compact between the suitors at the inn was a thing of the past, and I now expected them to exercise all the ingenuity of which desperate lovers are capable in pressing their claims. The fact that both Wiggins and Pepperton were old friends of mine did not make my task easier. I not only felt it incumbent on me to prevent Dick, the holder of the clue, from taking advantage of it, but knowing Cecilia's own attitude of mind and heart toward Wiggins I wished to save Pepperton the pain of rejection if it could be done.

But what did Hezekiah mean by the question with which she ended her note? If Wiggins, smarting under Cecilia's treatment of him the

day before, had quit the field, here was a pretty how-d'ye-do! Miss Octavia's refusal to countenance telephones made it necessary for me to leave Hopefield to learn what had become of Wiggins, and I realized that I must act promptly if I saved the day for him. His conduct first and last had been spiritless, and I was out of patience with him. It seemed impossible to formulate any plan amidst these multiplying uncertainties. If Wiggins had decamped, Dick knew it and would lay his plans accordingly. I felt that it was base ingratitude on Wiggins's part to ask me to watch his interests while he went roaming indifferently over the country. One or two consoling reflections remained, however: Dick believed me to be a suitor for Cecilia's hand, and this doubtless caused him considerable uneasiness; and he did not know that Pepperton, whose acquaintance with Cecilia antedated the European flight, had to be reckoned with. I wished Pepperton had kept out of it.

Breakfast that morning was interminably long. Miss Octavia was never more thoroughly amusing, never more drolly inadvertent. She attacked Pepperton for all the evils in American architecture, and in particular took him to task for some house he had built at Newport which she pronounced the most hideous pile of marble

on American soil. From her packet of newspaper-cuttings she drew a letter her brother Bassford had written to the "Sun," — the writing of letters to newspapers was, it seemed, one of his weaknesses, — protesting against the quality of the music ground from the New York hurdy-gurdies. The selections were execrable; the fierce tempo at which the instruments were driven had caused an alarming increase in insanity, in proof of which he adduced statistics. He demanded municipal censorship, and volunteered to sit on the proposed commission of critics without pay.

"That is just like brother Bassford! When I begin speaking to him again I shall point out the error of his ways. I always miss the hurdy-gurdies when I'm in the country, and I believe I shall buy one and have it play me to sleep at night. The faster the tempo the sweeter the slumber. I should certainly do so," she concluded, with that indefinable smile that always left one wondering, "if it were not that my new laundress is a graduate of the Sandusky-Ottumwa Conservatory of Music, and I fear the toreador's song on wheels might be painful to one of her taste and temperament."

When we left the table at about half-past ten Miss Octavia insisted that we must visit the kennels. A friend had just sent her a fine Aire-

dale, and she wished to make sure the kennel-master was treating the dog properly. Later we were all to ride.

I made haste to excuse myself, saying that personal matters required attention.

"Certainly, Arnold, you shall do as you like. Mr. Pepperton is a difficult bird to catch, so we hope for you at luncheon, and of course we expect you for dinner."

Pepperton looked at me inquiringly. I judged that he had known Miss Octavia a good many years; the tone of their intercourse was intimate; and yet he plainly was at a loss to understand just how I came to be so thoroughly established in her good graces. I confess that as I glance back over these pages it looks odd to me!

As I paced the hall waiting for a horse to be saddled, Pepperton led me out on the terrace above the garden.

"I'm bursting with a great secret, old man. I'm going to be married."

"What!"

"I'm going to be married."

I grasped a chair to support myself. This was almost too much. Could it be possible that Hezekiah had miscalculated the list of rejections in the silver-bound book, or that Cecilia herself had been deceived? Pepperton misread my agi-

tation, and with a hearty laugh clapped me on the shoulder.

"Oh, I'm not intruding on your preserves, old man! Cecilia is the second finest girl in the world, that's all. I'm engaged to Miss Gaylord, of Stockbridge. I'm telling a few old friends, in advance of the formal announcement to be made next week at a dance the Gaylords are giving."

I crushed his hand in both my own, and seeing that he misconstrued the fervor of my emotion I hastened to set myself right.

"You're a lucky dog as usual, Pep. But you don't understand about Cecilia Hollister. It's not I; I'm not in the running at all; but Hartley Wiggins is! I'm here trying to help him score."

"What's this? You're here to represent Wiggy?"

"Well, he did n't exactly send me here, but when I came I found that Wiggy was n't playing the game with quite the necessary zipology. There's more required than appears, — a little of the dash and snap of the old adventures, — the ready tongue, the eager, thirsty sword!" —

Pepperton pursed his lips and looked me over carefully with a twinkle in his eye.

"You are contributing those elements! You are octaviaized, is that it?" Pepperton laughed until the tears came.

"I prefer hollisterized as the broader term. Brother Bassford has it too, and there's always Hezekiah!"

"Ah! Hezekiah the unpredictable! I knew there was a skirt fluttering somewhere. I saw her yesterday; stopped to see Bassford, who's a good old chap. Hezekiah of the teasing eyes was white-washing the chicken-coop, and Michael Angelo could n't have done it better."

"Pep," I said, lowering my voice, "if you love me, keep close to Cecilia all day. You're an engaged man and in practice. Give an imitation of devotion. Keep her out of doors; keep male human beings away from her. Don't fail me in this. I've got to pull off the greatest coup of my life to-day. There's a band of outlaws hanging round here who will propose to Cecilia the first chance they get — and they must NOT. Wig 's got to speak before night or lose out forever. No; not a word of explanation; you've got to take my word for it."

"I'll be the goat; go ahead, but build a fire under Wiggins; I can't stay here forever."

Pepperton's engagement smoothed out one wrinkle, and I felt sure that I could trust him as an ally. The groom was holding my horse in the porte-cochère, and I mounted and rode away to the Prescott Arms.

I found Ormsby, Shallenberger, Arbuthnot, Henderson, Hume, and Gorse glumly sitting in a semicircle before the hall fireplace. Deepest gloom pervaded the inn. I have rarely seen melancholy so darkly stamped upon the human countenance. They turned indifferently and glared as they recognized me. Shallenberger alone rose and greeted me.

"I hope there is no bad news," he said chokingly.

"Bad news?"

"I mean Miss Hollister — Miss Cecilia. We were all deeply grieved last night to hear of her sudden illness; there's always something so terrible in the very name of diphtheria."

My wits had been so sharpened by my late adventures that I readily accounted for these false tidings. Dick was absent; Dick alone would have been equal to this diabolical plot for keeping his rival suitors away from Hopefield. The despair in those faces taxed my gravity severely.

"It is extremely sad, but the first diagnosis was erroneous," I answered. "I think it more likely to prove to be chicken-pox when the truth is known."

"Not diphtheria?"

"No immediate danger of diphtheria, I assure

you," I replied; "though of course, with winter coming on and all that, one must be prepared for the worst."

While he repeated this to the others, I sought the clerk, who promptly handed me a note which Wiggins had left late the previous afternoon, to be delivered in case I called. He had gone to spend a day or two with Orton, the playwright, who was at his country house, in the hills beyond Mt. Kisco, rehearsing a new piece, in which a friend of Hartley's was to star. I gained the telephone-booth in one jump, and in five minutes I was bawling wildly into Orton's ear. I had known him well in the Hare and Tortoise, and he answered my demand for Wiggins with the heart-breaking news that Hartley had ridden off with some other guests in the house — Orton did n't know where.

"I threw them out; I've got to rewrite my third act; I don't care whether they ever come back," boomed Orton's voice.

"If you don't send Wiggins back to me at Hopefield as fast as he can get there, *my* third act is ruined."

"What?"

"Tell Wiggins to come back on the run; tell him the world 's coming to an end any minute."

"I'll be glad to get rid of him," snapped

Orton, in the harried tone of a man whose third act has wilted in rehearsal.

As I came perspiring out of the telephone-booth I found the suitors engaged in eager but subdued debate by the hearth. They could hardly have heard my bleatings over the telephone, but they were greatly concerned about something. Shallenberger, who was apparently the only one willing to approach me, followed me to the veranda.

"Those fellows in there don't understand this. Dick told us all last night, after we had called at the house and been refused admittance, that Miss Cecilia was ill with diphtheria. I remember that it was Dick who rang the bell and gave our cards to the footman. It was quite singular, you know, our being turned away, unless something had been wrong."

I bowed gravely. They had been turned away for the very simple reason that, after unearthing Adoniram Caldwell's effects in the secret rooms of her house, Miss Octavia had not cared to be troubled with suitors. The haughty Nebraskan had drawn upon his imagination for the rest.

"And I understood you to say a moment ago that Miss Hollister's malady is not diphtheria, but chicken-pox?" Shallenberger persisted with

almost laughable trepidation. "These gentlemen, I regret to say, go so far as to doubt your word."

"That, Mr. Shallenberger, is their privilege. But it seems to me that when I merely tried to mitigate the terrible news imparted by Dick, you are rank ingrates for questioning my far less doubtful story. Anything between you gentlemen and Mr. Dick is, of course, none of my affair, for whether considered as a set, group or bunch I am done with the whole lot of you. Farewell!"

I decided as I rode away that nothing was to be gained by going in search of Wiggins. Orton had purposely made his house difficult of access, and the roads in that neighborhood are many and devious. Orton had banished his guests that he might tinker his play in peace, and knowing his temper, I was sure that Wiggins and the rest of them would keep out of his way till the pangs of hunger drove them back.

I had ridden half a mile toward Hopefield, when I espied a woman riding rapidly toward me, and as she drew nearer I identified her as Hezekiah, mounted on a horse I recognized as one of the best in Miss Octavia's stables. Hezekiah rode astride, as a woman should, her bicycle skirt serving well as a habit. She rode as a boy

rides who loves freedom and quickened pulses and the rush of wind across his face. She was hatless, for which the sun and I were both grate-

ful. The big bow at the back of her head turned the dial back to sixteen.

She drew rein and fished what seemed to be salted almonds from her sweater pocket. She filliped one of these into the air, and caught it in her mouth with a lazy toss of the head that

showed the firm contour of her lovely throat. I had never seen her more self-possessed.

"Do you care much for this horse?" she asked, carelessly.

"It's a good horse; I fancy Miss Octavia thinks so herself. There are places, Hezekiah, where they hang people for horse-stealing."

"Thought I might need one to-day, so I borrowed him, — through the back way to the old red barn. The coachman is an ancient chum, and Aunt Octavia would never mind even if she knew. And she will know all right! Anyhow, my rear tire had been patched once too often, and there is a satisfaction in a horse! Where's our sensitive and impressionable Wiggy? Saw him riding over toward Kisco yesterday P. M. with chin on his chest, — dreadful riding form."

"Wiggins is at Orton's, — the playwright's, you know. I've telephoned him to hustle back, but he's out of our reach somewhere. I could n't speak to him direct; had to leave a message for him."

"Just like Wiggy to die on the last lap. What did you make out of brother Pepperton?"

"Your note scared me, — thanks so much for your note, — but he's all right. Engaged to another girl."

"Ah," she sighed, "it's comforting that Cecilia could n't keep them all going all the time."

We rode along together, our horses in a walk, and I told her everything I knew of the condition of affairs, including a true account of my experiences at the inn the day before and of the finding of the old chest belonging to Wiggins's great-grandfather, — her brown eyes opened wide at this, — concluding with the diphtheria stratagem and Dick's menace to Cecilia's happiness.

"He's really a bright little boy. Coming home on the steamer he gave me a post-graduate course in pragmatism that I've found helpful in keeping house for papa. It's too bad we have to lay a trap for Mr. Dick."

"Is it? Just how are we to manage that, Hezekiah?"

"Oh, that will be easy enough. He's pretty desperate, and since the compact between the suitors has gone to pieces he knows he will have to show his hand pretty soon. He thinks you are wild about Cecilia. He lays great stress on his thinking powers, and he probably argues that you are bound to pop pretty soon. It 's just as well he thinks so, but we must finish this up to-day; I'll be a nervous wreck if we don't close the books to-night. There's your friend Dick now."

She indicated a high point in the main road, where it crossed the ridge from which she had shown me — it seemed, oh, very long ago! — the procession of suitors crossing the stile. Dick, mounted, was gazing off across the fields toward Hopefield. Man and horse were so distant as to create the illusion of an equestrian statue on a high pedestal.

"Napoleon before Waterloo," I suggested.

"He does look like Napoleon, does n't he?" she laughed. "He's a bit fussed to-day. He knows that Wiggy 's not at the inn, and that you are up to something, and to little Mr. Dick the architect probably looks like one of those mysterious knights you read about, who suddenly appears at the tournament all canned in an ice-cream freezer, with a tin pail over his head. Mr. Pepperton's presence no doubt worries him, as I don't think they ever met. Cecilia and Mr. Pepperton are riding — I dodged them just before I struck you, walking their horses in the most loverlike fashion in a lane over yonder; but if Mr. Pepperton is really engaged it's all right, though if I were the other girl I think I'd be anxious."

"Pep's playing the game, that 's all. What are you going to do now?"

She glanced at the sun; I fancy that it was

with such a scanning of the heavens that her sisters a thousand years before had noted the time.

"This is my pie-day. There's undoubtedly a gooseberry-pie waiting for me at the bungalow, and papa will expect me for luncheon. I'd ask you to come too, only you'll have all you can do to keep Mr. Dick from persuading somebody to be the sixth man, so he can slip in as number seven. If we get through to-day all right, you may come for luncheon to-morrow, maybe. Papa told me he liked you; he said you were very decent that night you met him on the roof of Aunt Octavia's house."

"My compliments to your father. I hope to be able to persuade him to extend his paternal arm to include me. Aunt Octavia must be my aunt, too!"

"Really!" cried Hezekiah, with indescribable mockery; and she wheeled her horse and was gone like the wind.

Luncheon at Hopefield passed without incident; and afterward Cecilia retired to help her aunt with her correspondence, while Pepperton and I lounged about the house and smoked. I told him of my ineffectual efforts to reach Wiggins, and he volunteered to find a motor and search for him; but I pointed out the futility of

this, and renewed my appeal that he stay on guard at Hopefield.

At about three o'clock Cecilia reappeared. Her color was high and her eyes were unusually brilliant. I knew that she fully realized that the crisis was near, but she asked no questions and her manner reassured me of her confidence. We idled on the stone terrace above the frost-smitten garden, which in its ruin still satisfied the eye with color. I had purposely drawn some chairs to a corner well screened by vines, so that I could note the approach of any visitors who came cross country by way of the stile.

We were hardly seated before Dick entered the garden, followed immediately by the six other suitors I had last seen at the inn. They ranged themselves on a stone bench facing the house at the end of one of the paths. They wore sack coats and hats in a variety of styles, so that they did not present quite the bizarre effect produced by their frock coats and silk tiles. They surveyed the house sadly, bowed their heads upon their sticks, and seemed to have come to stay. The siege, then, had become a practical matter!

"Why don't the gentlemen come in?" asked Cecilia, peering through the vines.

"Hush! There's a rumor that you are terribly

ill; they've come merely to pay their tribute of respect by waiting in the garden. You had better go quietly into the house. The shock of seeing you in your usual health might be too much for them."

"But I can't! I must be accessible at all times," she cried, looking helplessly from me to Pepperton, who was all at sea for an explanation. "If that impression is abroad, I shall appear at once."

"Then you and Pepperton must patrol the terrace here; you are lovers for all I know. Ignore them utterly in your absorption with one another. If any one approaches you, Pepperton, ask Miss Hollister to marry you."

"Me!" gasped Pepperton.

"No; it can't be done that way," Cecilia interposed. "Mr. Pepperton has told me of his engagement. I can't be party to a fraud, a trick. I can't countenance it at all. It would ruin everything!"

"Then stay right here; pace back and forth, and I'll manage the rest. I don't for the life of me know how, but I'll do it."

As Cecilia and Pepperton stepped from behind the screen of vines, the men on the benches lifted their heads; then I heard murmurs of amazement and chagrin, and caught a fleeting

glimpse of Dick tearing through the hedge with his late companions tumbling after in fierce pursuit.

I ran to the stable and found a horse, feeling that I must be in a position to move rapidly if I saw Wiggins approaching. If Dick eluded his wrathful pursuers he would be on the lookout somewhere, awaiting his own time, and if he saw Wiggins rushing madly for the house, he might yet circumvent us.

I satisfied myself that Cecilia and Pepperton were still plainly visible from the garden, and I knew that for the time she was safe. I gained the high point in the road from which Hezekiah and I had observed Dick on guard at noon, and waited. Remembering the fine figure the philosopher had made against the sky, I dismounted and rested by a stone wall where I could watch with less risk of being seen from a distance.

I at once saw matters that interested me immensely. Dick had thrown off the other suitors, and was rapidly crossing the fields toward Hopefield. When I caught sight of him, he was just leaving the orchard where Hezekiah and I had held our memorable interview. A long stretch of rough pasture lay before him, and he settled down to a quick trot. He took several fences

without lessening his gait, crossed the stile like a flash a little later, and was out of sight.

As I turned to my horse I heard the swift patter of hoofs, and saw a man and woman galloping furiously toward me. They were rapidly nearing the ridge, and their horses were springing over the firm white road in prodigious leaps. Wiggins had got my message; Hezekiah had met him in the road and was urging him on! Here indeed was a situation to stir the heart, and the blood sang in my ears as I watched them. I waved my arm as they checked their horses for the long climb. The riders had lost their hats in their mad race, and Wiggins's horse was nearly done for. As they came still nearer, I saw that Wiggins had taken fire at last.

"Orton said some one was killed, — who— what — who" —

"I just picked him up five minutes ago; he does n't know anything," said Hezekiah; "and you dare n't tell him — remember the rules! What's doing?" she inquired coolly.

She bade Wiggins exchange horses with her, and while he was readjusting the saddle-girths I explained to Hezekiah the situation at Hopefield and told her of Dick's scamper across the fields.

"There's no use fooling with this thing any more. I'll take Wiggy to the house and lock

him up until I've been numbered six, — it's safest."

"Not much it is n't. I don't intend that Cecilia shall have the pleasure of refusing you."

"I'd like to know why not. It's only to fill the gap."

"Oh!" said Hezekiah, "that would be an embarrassment to me all the rest of my life. Listen carefully. Take Wiggy in by the back way, and give him a picture-book to look at. Leave Cecilia alone on the terrace when you're all ready, and see what happens. If Dick's on his way to the house he's going to do something, and he must feel the edge of my displeasure. I owe him a few on general principles."

"What does all this mean? You say there 's nothing wrong at the house?" began Wiggins as we left Hezekiah and started toward Hopefield.

"Nothing whatever the matter; everything perfectly all right; but you've got to keep mum now and do what I tell you. I've worked hard for you, old man, and when it's all over I'm going to send you a bill for professional services. Come!"

I urged my horse to his utmost, and Wiggins rode steadily beside me. The fright Orton had given him had done my friend good, and I felt

that I was dealing with a live man at last. Our speed did not permit conversation, but feeling that Wiggins was entitled to some further assurance, I waited until we were climbing our last hill to add a word.

"I'll tell you all about this after we have a good-night cigar to-night. You know I told you I was going to help, and if nothing goes wrong and Hezekiah does n't fail, you will see the world with new eyes before you sleep."

We rode direct to the stable, and I took Wiggins to my room by the back stairs and bade him help himself to my raiment. He was perfectly tractable, and I was glad to see that he trusted implicitly to my guidance.

I met Miss Octavia in the lower hall. She was just in from the kennels. Her new Airedale was a perfect specimen of the breed, she declared, and she announced her intention of exhibiting him at all the reputable bench shows in America.

"I hope, Arnold, that you have not been without entertainment to-day."

"Miss Hollister, the three musketeers were fat monks asleep under the sunny wall of a monastery compared with me!"

"I am glad you are not bored. By the way, if you should by any chance see Hezekiah, you will kindly intimate to her that if she returns that

Estabrook mare she borrowed this morning in reasonably good condition, I will overlook her indiscretion in taking it from the stable without permission."

She did not wait for a reply, but continued on to her room, and I went direct to the terrace. Cecilia and Pepperton were just going into the house to look up a book or piece of music which they had been discussing. Cecilia was making herself interesting, as she so well knew how to do, and she seemed in no wise anxious.

"We had forgotten tea," she said. "Aunt Octavia has just ordered it."

"She and Mr. Pepperton may have their tea. I believe the air outside will do you good for a little longer, — so if you don't mind, Pepperton, Miss Hollister will resume her promenade alone."

Pep has told me since that he thought me quite mad that afternoon. I bade Cecilia patrol the long terrace slowly. She turned up the collar of the covert coat and obeyed, laughing a little nervously but asking no questions. The scene could not have been more charmingly set. The great house loomed darkly behind her; beneath lay the garden, over which the dusk was stealing goldenly.

She paused suddenly as I watched from the window, and I stepped out to see what had

attracted her attention. There into the garden from its farther entrance filed the six suitors who had previously come to sit beneath the windows of their stricken lady! Having failed to visit their wrath upon the perfidious Dick they had changed their clothes and returned to Hopefield. If Hezekiah had not expressly commanded me not to become the sixth man, I should have offered myself on the spot, and waited only until Cecilia had made the inevitable answer before summoning Wiggins to end the whole affair. Such, however, was not to be the order of events.

The procession, headed by Ormsby, was within a few yards of the terrace. Cecilia, apparently unconscious of their proximity, continued her promenade. In a moment she must recognize them, ask them into the house, give them tea, and otherwise destroy my hope of securing her happiness before the day's end.

A chorus of yelps and barks, as of dogs suddenly released, greeted my ear. The oncoming suitors heard it too, and the line wobbled uncertainly. Then round the house swept mastiffs, hounds, terriers, — a collection of prize-winners such as few kennels ever boasted, loping gayly in unwonted freedom toward unknown and forbidden pastures.

The vanguard of fox-terriers leaped down into the garden, with the rest of the pack at their heels. Happy dogs, to find grown men ready for a gambol! Six coat-tails streamed from the hips of six gentlemen in a hurry. Several battered hats mixed with geraniums were retained later as spoils of war by the gardener. That garden had been built for repose and contemplative amblings, not for panic and flight. The disorder was superior in picturesqueness to that which attended the pumpkin stampede; at least it struck me at the moment as funnier; and I have never since been able to attend a day wedding without appearing idiotic — the procession of ushers suggests possibilities that are too much for me. Four of the suitors found one of the proper exits into the road; two leaped the box-hedge on the other side without shaking a leaf.

I ran round the house, stumbling through the rear-guard of the truant canines, and passing the kennel-master, who had rallied the stable men and was in hot pursuit.

"Somebody turned 'em out — turned 'em out!" he shouted, and swept profanely by. The gate of the kennel-yard stood open. A familiar figure, running low, paused, and then sprinted nimbly along the paddock fence. A white sweater was distinguishable for a moment on a

stone wall, then it followed a pair of enchanted heels into oblivion.

Time had been passing swiftly, and the shadows were deepening. I retraced my steps toward the terrace, hearing the cries of pursued and pursuers growing fainter. I had not yet gained a position from which I could see Cecilia, when a man appeared some distance ahead of me, walking guardedly in one of the garden-plots. He came uncertainly, pausing to glance about, yet evidently led toward the terrace by a definite purpose. All may be fair in love and war, but I confess to a feeling of pity for John Stewart Dick as I watched him slowly advancing to his fate. He was going boldly now, and I felt a sudden liking for him; nor can I believe that he was other than a manly fellow with sound brains and a good heart.

I reasoned, as I marked his approach to the terrace, that he had been loitering in the neighborhood, probably watching Cecilia and Pepperton, and when the architect retired, he had assumed that the sixth man had spoken. The appearance of his former comrades of the inn had doubtless disturbed him as it had me; then, thanks to the resourceful Hezekiah, they had been routed and the coast was clear. I think it likely that the sight of Cecilia sombrely

pacing the terrace in the darkening shadows was too much for his philosophic poise, or like the rest of us who were actors in that comedy, he may have felt that any end was better than the doubts and uncertainties that beset us.

I watched him draw nearer to Cecilia as I have watched deer go down to a lake to drink. He would speak now; I was confident of it; and I stole round to the side entrance and sent word to Wiggins to go to the drawing-room and wait for me.

Miss Octavia and Pepperton still lingered over their tea-cups. The row made by the fugitives from her kennels had not, it seemed, penetrated to the library, and Miss Octavia bade me join the talk, which had to do, I remember, with some project for a national hall of fame that had incurred her characteristic displeasure. A hall of immortal rascals in pillories she thought far likelier to please the masses.

In fifteen minutes I saw Cecilia crossing the hall. She stopped where I could see her quite plainly, and thrust her hand into the pocket of her coat. Out flashed the silver note-book. She made a swift notation with the pencil that now, I knew, wrote the fate of the sixth man.

I went out and spoke to her, and walked beside

her to the drawing-room door, where Hartley Wiggins was waiting.

Miss Octavia had risen when I returned to the library, and it was time to dress for dinner.

"Just a moment, Miss Hollister. Something of great interest is about to occur;" and I made excuses for detaining her for perhaps five minutes, — not more.

"You have never yet deceived me, Arnold Ames, and such is my confidence in you that if you tell me that something interesting will soon occur, I have no reason to doubt you. It is worth remembering, however, that fowl is not improved by prolonged roasting."

I heard Wiggins laugh in the hall, and Miss Octavia raised her head. Then Cecilia came into the room, and walked directly to her aunt.

"Aunt Octavia, here is the little silver notebook you gave me in Paris; I have just written Mr. Wiggins's name in it, and as I have no further use for the book, I return it with my love and thanks."

Without a word, Miss Octavia turned to the wall and pressed the button twice.

"William," she said as the butler appeared, "you may serve Oriana '97, and be careful not to freeze it to death; and the hour for dinner is changed to eight. Arnold, you may yourself

drive to Gooseberry Bungalow for my brother and niece. They dine with me to-night."

Hezekiah and I built our bungalow in the orchard where on that October afternoon I found her munching a red apple on the stone wall. She is the most scrupulous of housewives, and only now took me to task for scattering the hearth with fragments of the notes from which this narrative has been written. She has just been reading these last pages, with meditative brown eyes, and not without occasionally reaching for the pen and retouching some sentence in which, she says, soot from my chimney-doctoring days has clogged the ink. Cecilia and Wiggins live at Hopefield across the fields. Miss Octavia insisted on this, for the reason that the sword of Hartley's great-grandfather, found in the chest under the old house, gives him inalienable rights to the premises. Miss Octavia and her brother Bassford are traveling abroad and enjoying those mild adventures to which they are both temperamentally inclined. As Miss Octavia carried with her the Parker House umbrella-check I am confident of her early return.

My name is joined to Pepperton's on his office-door. Pepperton proposed this arrangement, with so many assurances of faith in me

that I could not refuse him; but I knew well enough that Miss Octavia had first put it into his head. So while I have called myself a chimney-doctor in these pages, I am again an architect, and the new cathedral now rising at Waxahaxie is, let me modestly note, the work of my hand.

"You ought to say something more about the Asolando," Hezekiah has just murmured at my shoulder. "Everybody will ask whether we ever went back there."

"Of course we go back there, Hezekiah, every time you come to town and can get hold of me. Will that be enough?"

"You'd better explain that Aunt Octavia started the tea-room and still owns it, and makes money out of it, though she rarely goes there, but sends Freda the maid to collect the profits. And it won't do any harm to say that when she met you there that day, she decided at once that you would be a proper husband for me. Any one who reads your book will want to know that."

Hezekiah is always right; so here endeth the chronicle.